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## ARTICLE

### Chicano Lite<sup>1</sup>

Mexican-American consumer culture on the border

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*Abstract.* This article is an ethnography of working-class, Mexican-American consumer patterns on the US–Mexico border. Through a study of locally-owned grocery stores, family parties and fast-food restaurants in El Paso, Texas, I examine the double-edged nature of border consumerism. Minority consumers, such as Mexican-Americans, often modify mainstream consumer products and processes to suit their own needs and values. The resultant consumer styles embody a considerable degree of creativity, contradiction and hybridity, especially for immigrant minorities. I show how, despite their subordinated class and status positions in US society, Mexican-Americans create spaces of resistant cultural meaning within consumer spheres normally treated as generically (Anglo-) American. I conclude that US consumer culture is both a source of self-fulfilment and a means through which Mexican-Americans become further enmeshed in a system of vastly unequal political and economic power.

#### *Key words*

Chicano • culture and food • ethnography • Latino • US–Mexico border

## INTRODUCTION: STUDIES OF CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION

Two major theoretical approaches have dominated anthropological studies of consumption. One approach focuses on issues of identity, meaning, style and content (Baudrillard, 1975; Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Miller, 1994, 1997, 2001; Ritzer, 2000).<sup>2</sup> The second approach, generally critical of the first for its (supposed) lack of attention to political

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economy, emphasizes issues of inequality, class and status (Carrier, 1995; Carrier and Heyman, 1997; Chin, 2001; Dávila, 2001; Ewen, 1988; Ewen and Ewen, 1982; Heyman, 2001). This dichotomy is meant only as a heuristic because the most insightful approaches combine an interest in style and meaning with a concern for power and inequality (Ritzer, 2004; Zukin, 2004).

Ethnic minorities are especially sensitive to the Janus-like, both confining and emancipating, dimensions of consumerism. As García Canclini (2001) has argued for Latin America, minorities are simultaneously consumers in the global economy and self-conscious participants in ethnic/national cultures. The expansion of global markets and contraction of state-sponsored social welfare programs creates space for new subjectivities and emerging hybridities with contestatory potential (Yúdice, 2001: ix–xxxviii). García Canclini (2001) argues that the postmodern consuming citizen lives in a polylingual, migratory space that is more commensurate with the contours of the global market economy than with state boundaries. For García Canclini (2001: 28), in the new conditions of consumption, 'the diversification of tastes [becomes] one of the aesthetic foundations for the democratic conception of citizenship.' Such a challenging hypothesis must be investigated empirically, however. It is important to evaluate the extent to which the diverse consumption patterns of minority 'citizens-consumers', such as Mexican-Americans on the US–Mexican border, in fact demonstrate liberatory creativity, or whether they are indicative of unreflexive mimetism or 'disabling separatism' (Yúdice, 2001).

Minority consumers, such as Mexican-Americans, may modify mainstream consumer products and processes to suit their own needs and values. Miller (1994: 79–81) illustrates how low-income consumers, such as ethnic minorities in stratified societies, engage in 'creative consumption' entailing 'complementary and contradictory strategies,' and thus forge heterogeneous paths within 'modernity.' Recently, Chin (2001) explored the limiting and stigmatizing elements of consumer life among low-income African-Americans. Dávila (2001), in an important study of the impact of the American consumer economy on ethnic minorities, analyzed the Hispanic marketing industry and its construction of 'Hispanic culture.'

As these studies show, the modern world consumer economy contributes to class stratification, ethnic segmentation, and status inequalities but, at the same time, individuals and groups of consumers, even at the lower levels of buying power, seek to minimize the stigma of their lesser social and class status through the creation of meaning through diverse styles of consumption. The resultant consumer styles embody a

considerable degree of contradiction and hybridity, especially for immigrant minorities.

The present study,<sup>3</sup> focused on a minority ethnic group (Mexican-Americans)<sup>4</sup> in the poorest large city (El Paso) in the USA, analyzes an intricate, vibrant consumer economy (Peñaloza, 1994) among a population that is frequently treated in social science literature as a victimized, ethnically distinct working-class subculture. While partially accurate, I feel that such portrayals err in neglecting (1) the extent to which working-class Mexican-Americans participate in a heavily commodified, media-saturated, world of consumerism (Peñaloza and Gilly, 1986), and (2) the degree to which, despite their subordinated class and status positions in US society, Mexican-Americans create spaces of resistant cultural meaning within consumer spheres normally treated as generically (Anglo-) American.<sup>5</sup>

Such an interpretation is critical of analyses that frame any involvement by Mexican-Americans in mainstream US consumer culture as 'assimilation' or 'selling-out.' Yet I recognize that Mexican-American consumer experience is not simply a case of successful cultural resistance. It also involves social situations of contradiction and ambivalence (Ramamurthy, 2003).<sup>6</sup> As Ramamurthy (2003: 525) states, 'perplexity is a way of marking the tension between overlapping, opposing, and asymmetric forces or fields of power. Perplexity indexes the puzzlement of people as they experience both the joys and aches of the global everyday, often simultaneously.' In the Mexican-American case, 'creative consumption' à la Miller (1994, 1998, 2001) produces pleasure and indebtedness, satisfaction and health problems, such as increasing rates of diabetes and obesity related to US-influenced consumption styles.<sup>7</sup> It also produces mixed identities, situational ethnicities and consumer styles that do not fit neatly into received ethnic categories.

While rejecting simple assimilationist views of Mexican-Americans, I do not wish to go to the opposite extreme and essentialize Mexican-Americans as primordial bearers of Mexican culture who have radically incommensurate notions of consumption from other 'Americans.' In fact, border consumer trends may often represent Mexican-Americans' efforts to differentiate themselves culturally from Mexican nationals on the border (cf. Vila, 2000). Finally, while emphasizing ways Mexican-American consumption cultures may differ from Anglo and Mexican national norms, I have no intention of trying to homogenize them through a defensive analysis that explains away 'different' consumption styles as ultimately economically logical or as false representations (cf. Chin, 2001; Dávila, 2001). Attempts to defend 'victimized' subcultures in paternalistic ways or

rationalize their 'different' consumption patterns in terms of economic logic may have the counterproductive effect of whitewashing sub-cultural uniqueness (Dohan, 2003: 13).

Though Mexican-Americans are deeply immersed in consumer culture, it is possible, without essentializing, to identify in their consumption patterns elements of familism, communalism (as opposed to individualism), and ludic expressiveness (Limón, 1989). These cultural dimensions of Mexican-American consumption patterns often occur within idioms or practices, such as grocery shopping, commercialized parties and fast-food restaurants stereotypically labelled 'American.'

### MEXICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE IN EL PASO

El Paso, Texas, is one of the largest Hispanic majority cities in the USA.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the substantial Mexican-American community, the Mexican presence in El Paso is augmented by its neighbor city, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, with a population of approximately 1.5 million. The El Paso Mexican-American community is not confined to 'traditional' barrios but is spread throughout the middle and working-class suburbs (and also represented to a degree in the elite western suburbs), as well as the irregular, outlying settlements known as *colonias* (Silva and Campbell, 1998). Although Mexican-Americans receive lower than average aggregate incomes, the position of this article is that mainstream Mexican-American experience is just as immersed, albeit in different ways, in a world of commodities, consumerism, and 'postmodern' culture as that of Anglo-Americans or most other groups in the modern USA (Dávila, 2001; Foley, 1990). Furthermore, as Pimentel (2003) and Vila (2000) have found, a younger generation of Mexican-Americans less connected to Mexico and 'traditional' culture than their parents is becoming predominant. What does this mean for Mexican-American/Chicano Studies and anthropological studies of consumption?

For Gómez-Peña (1996), the emerging Chicano experience was a potentially liberating force because of its postmodern freedom to transcend essentialist cultural dichotomies and create new hybrid blends of Indo, Mexicano, Chicano and Anglo cultural forms. Anzaldúa (1987) celebrated the New Mestiza who was Indian, Mexican, Anglo and more, a border heroine who transformed liminal contact zones into sites of power and cultural richness. Stylish border studies lauded the border-crossing Chicanos who creatively worked the cultural frontiers and borderlands, creating a third space of resistance and freedom (Rosaldo, 1989; Saldívar, 1997). Stavans (2003) called Spanglish the most important linguistic

phenomenon in the USA, the new Latino language of a powerful minority rivalling a declining WASP majority.

The ethnography presented here illustrates a much more sobering, prosaic landscape; one of young, largely working-class, Mexican-Americans for whom Aztlán and Tenochtitlán, Chicano nationalist rhetoric and César Chávez are names in textbooks more than lived realities. The most compelling elements of their world, we will argue, as for most people in the industrialized countries of the 'First World,' are the signs, symbols, and spectacles of consumer, commodity culture (Ritzer, 1999; cf. Ngai, 2003). This scenario produces a consumer response that – rather than reflecting binary opposition or liberating border crossing – combines 'assimilation,' resistance and 'perplexity' (Oswald, 1999; Ramamurthy, 2003).

The involvement of Hispanic youth in the consumer world is not a trivial matter given that Hispanics, the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the USA, represent a multi-hundred billion-dollar consumer market (Tharp and Bromley, 2001). We need to try to understand this seemingly apolitical, consumer-oriented generation on its own terms rather than subject it to moralistic condemnation or the projection of our own cultural/political fantasies. The deep involvement of Mexican-American youth in US consumerism is not a simple cultural 'choice' to become 'Americanized' – as the issue is often understood – but the result of larger political economic processes associated with globalization, technological transformation and 'situational ethnicity' (Stayman and Despande, 1989; Waters, 1990). As Heyman (2001: 144) explains: 'People are not tricked into desiring western consumer goods [read US mainstream cultural goods] nor are they subject to blind imitation, but rather they undergo transformations . . . generating similar needs, with viable responses limited to those technologies [and consumer products] currently marketed.' Likewise, consumption of products assumed to be generically 'American,' and hence lacking 'ethnic' cultural substance, is often viewed as 'normal,' 'natural' economic activity when, in fact, it is a deeply cultural process of considerable complexity.

Additionally, I oppose the notion that Mexico exists as a repository of unglobalized, noncapitalist values for Southwestern Chicanos to fall back on as an escape from US consumerism. It is my view that Mexico is nearly as enmeshed in consumerism as the USA, especially on the border (cf. García Canclini, 2001). Hence, my approach avoids the romanticizing essentialism so common in 'Hispanic marketing' (Dávila, 2001; Peñaloza and Gilly, 1999) and discussions of Mexican-American culture such as that of Gillenkirk<sup>9</sup> in a description of *The Rain God* by Arturo Islas, one of the classic novels about El Paso: 'A story of surprising subtlety and poignancy

. . . a lovely book, pitting the spirit of Mexican-American life – faith and family and laughter – against the cold Puritanism of “making it” in the United States’ (cf. Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983). Nor do I reduce every entanglement of Mexican-Americans in the US consumer culture to ‘the exercise of oppression and . . . responses to such oppression’ (Chin, 2001: 177). Instead, in this ethnographic study of the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border, I wish to analyze the contradictory elements of Mexican-American consumption culture. These involve considerable creativity and ambivalence within a context of economic inequality (Dohan, 2003) and extensive development of a grassroots consumer economy that benefits from Mexican-Americans’ numerical predominance locally even though they are national minorities.

### MEXICAN-AMERICAN CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION

The complexity of Mexican-American consumer culture in El Paso can be exemplified with reference to basic foods, such as the humble but omnipresent tortilla. Local consumers not only make the fundamental choice between flour (now also available in a ‘healthy’ wholewheat variety) and corn tortillas, but among dozens of different brands and styles, many of which are brought across the border daily from Mexico. These include large thin tortillas for making burritos, thick medium-sized tortillas for *gorditas*, tiny tortillas for *tacos al pastor*, yellow or white corn tortillas and raw cook-them-yourself tortillas.

Additionally, a fast-food meal, be it of tacos, burritos or hamburgers – the three most common prepared foods in this region – involves choice among literally thousands of restaurants and cafes and a bewildering array of consumer preferences that confound simple, binary notions of ethnic identity, culture, and nationality. Likewise, purchases from a vast array of consumer goods – also in myriad styles – is now available to all but the poorest consumers on the US side of the border (and to a growing extent in Mexico as well) through the advent of extremely inexpensive imported Chinese goods, especially in the now ubiquitous ‘Dollar Stores’ and flea markets, which are found throughout the USA but in greater numbers in poor communities like El Paso.

We might call this limited budget yet extensive consumerism ‘*consumismo de hormiga*.’ The evocative Spanish expression ‘*de hormiga*’ (on a small scale, literally antlike) signifies the energetic, industrious habits of the small budget consumer who is thoroughly engaged in a consumer lifestyle (i.e., *consumismo*), even if his/her budget allows for few expensive items. Poor consumers, whose budgets prevent them from investing in expensive

consumer durables like houses or new vehicles, may engage in conspicuous consumption, 'potlatch'-like<sup>10</sup> consumption of cheaper, more accessible items like clothing, fast food and cellular phones or create their own consumer symbols of value with '*cholo*' gang clothing styles or low-rider cars (Placencia, 1985).

El Paso consumption sites and styles that I will analyze include locally-operated grocery stores, food customs and culture at birthday parties, and fast-food restaurants such as Chico's Tacos. Chico's is one of the most popular fast-food restaurant chains and one that on the surface appears to be the essence of Mexican assimilation to American food but, in fact, is symbolically strongly associated with a Mexican-American, not Anglo, experience.

Due to space limitations, this article will concern mainly food culture, but it should be kept in mind that food is only one component of a large and complex Mexican-American popular culture – interwoven with a consumer economy – that includes musical styles, painting (including murals), and family and community social networks. A rich creative imagination also informs the Mexican-American *chola/o* (youth gang) culture, whose participants have developed a wide repertoire of decorative clothing, body adornment (especially among young women), hair styles and tattoos, and the low-rider car styles and street-racing competitions that are common and well-established in El Paso, despite 'no cruising zones' (Chappell, 2002). Additionally, the owner-builders of homes in outlying, irregular settlements known as *colonias* (of which there are more than 150 in El Paso) evidence considerable creativity in the architectural styles and decorations they invent with few resources.

A key element of Mexican-American creativity in the consumer world is the widespread use of Spanglish (Stavans, 2003) on radio, television, billboards, signs, and product advertisements, and in stores and restaurants. The majority of radio stations in El Paso broadcast in Spanish – and incorporate much Spanglish, especially in advertising on both Spanish and English channels – contrary to Dávila's (2001: 237) claim about 'marketer's disdain for Spanglish.' Two main radio stations that include Spanglish as main parts of their appeal to listeners are 93.9 FM (whose motto is 'Mexicanísima, La Caliente') and FM 97.5 (KBNA, aka '*Qué buena*' or '*Kbuena*'). On such stations, the announcers constantly pepper their Spanish patter with insertions of English words as in '*¿qué tal la música, nice, verdad?*' or '*anoche nos hizo reír mucho, esto explica la voz medio Mickey Mouse que traigo*' or combine modified versions of English and Spanish in one word or phrase, such as '*beernes*' (a 'corruption' of the English 'beer' and Spanish *viernes*) and '*ay te wacho*' (see you later; *wacho* from the English 'watch').<sup>11</sup>



In addition to radio and television stations and billboards and other forms of advertising,<sup>12</sup> Spanglish is standard language in most Mexican-American small businesses. The examples presented in this article provide merely a glimpse of the variety and boundless inventiveness of Spanglish as used by El Paso Mexican-Americans in daily commerce and social life.<sup>13</sup> While recognizing the creativity of Spanglish we must also deal with the fact that many working-class Mexican-Americans view Spanglish with both pride and self-loathing, as a source of verbal imagination and a limit or stigma vis-a-vis their upward mobility in English-only or Spanish-only work or educational settings. Thus, Spanglish typifies the contradictions and 'perplexities' of Mexican-American consumer culture.

### GROCERY STORES

The largest stores selling groceries in El Paso are chains including Albertson's and Wal-Mart. Alongside these retail giants, a smaller locally owned and operated chain, Big Eight, caters specifically to the poor and working-class Mexican and Mexican-American community. Thus, in Big Eight's approximately 15 stores a large section of a row is devoted to tortillas (and only a tiny area to bagels) and there are ample inventories of 'Mexican' cuts of meat (e.g., tripe, pig's feet, *discada*). Chiles, herbs, cilantro, limes and other vegetables and fruits essential to Mexican cuisine; dried beans and rice; Mexican pastries and beer; a delicatessen featuring burritos, tacos, *carnitas* and the like also abound.

In Big Eight, and other smaller neighborhood groceries like Quality Food Mart, Mexican advertising motifs, though present, are not really necessary as virtually all the customers and employees are Hispanic – a distinctive ethnic appeal being redundant. In any case, local Mexican-Americans have a wide variety of 'Mexican' consumer items to choose from and they may purchase them in contexts that they select, including corner stores and small locally-owned grocery chains like Big Eight, which was founded in 1947. One woman I interviewed noted that

My mother always went there [to Big Eight] because of the sales and the low prices. It is a local chain that works with local farmers . . . they have their Mexican items real cheap, like pastas four for a dollar . . . and the people are real personable. They set up shop where the community needs them most.

Throughout the city there are fruit stands and small mom-and-pop markets carrying many 'Mexican' products, the Juárez newspapers, and other items consumed primarily by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

J.R. Produce is an especially successful chain of small stores that sells a full range of vegetables and fruits and a wide range of Mexican products including piñatas, corn husks for tamales, fresh tortillas from Juárez, prepared food, handmade to the customer's specifications, such as *aguas frescas*, *licuados*, burritos, and *chilindrinas*, *paletas* (popsicles), votive candles, Mexican-style pastries, *queso chihuahua* and *queso menonita*. Many of these products were not widely or legally available until the advent of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). Aside from the low prices of the produce imported from Mexico, shoppers like the small, sociable face-to-face atmosphere and personalized service of J.R. Produce. Thus Big Eight and stores like J.R. Produce are able to compete successfully with the large chains because of their low prices (made possible by NAFTA and the proximity to Mexico), personable environment and neighborhood locations. These stores attempt to recapture the face-to-face intimacy and rootedness in local culture that was lost with the transition from five-and-dime stores to large supermarkets and discount chains studied by Zukin (2004: 63–88).

The González family started J.R. Produce as simply a produce truck in a shopping mall parking lot. The business took off when they secured a storefront and began selling delicious, inexpensive *aguas frescas*, cold drinks made from papayas, mangoes, tamarinds, pineapple, coconut and other Mexican tropical fruits. These beverages were very popular in hot, sunny El Paso as was the store's low prices on cheaply imported Mexican produce including 'exotic' items like *tejocotes*, cactus fruits, and a diverse array of Mexican chiles (including roasted chiles). Mexican-American and Mexican shoppers, especially older women, liked the culturally familiar set of products (many unavailable elsewhere) displayed in a crowded-together style reminiscent of small town 'traditional' markets in Mexican villages. Kids enjoyed the burrito, taco and *aguas frescas* stand in the back of the store. Subsequently, numerous small El Paso restaurants and stores also began selling *aguas frescas* to relieve the desert heat and other businesses took up the wholesale and retail marketing of tropical fruit *paletas*. This included street sales from *paleta* carts, the little refrigerators on wheels that are such a characteristic element of daily life in many parts of rural Mexico.

Silva's, another locally owned full service grocery store, sits right next to the Stanton Street bridge entrance into Juárez and sells numerous made in Mexico or Mexican-style food products – and American products – roughly equivalent to what one might find in a comparable-sized grocery store in Mexico. Silva's, like many of the stores and restaurants discussed in this article, is family-owned and operated. Up to now these locally owned

venues have not fallen into the dehumanizing patterns Ritzer (2004) analyzes in which 'non-things,' 'non-people,' and 'non-service' dominate the landscape.

The El Paso outlets of the major US retail chains all have huge inventories of Mexican products and even 7/11 convenience stores stock most basic items that are commonly used by Mexican-American households, such as tortillas, Mexican beer, salsa, Mexican candies, etc. In such a setting, the local consumer can easily fill a shopping list for even the most esoteric items that might go into 'traditional' Mexican cuisine or be part of an ethnically 'Mexican' lifestyle. The more specialized, ethnically marked grocery stores such as Big Eight, J.R. Produce, and Silva's are successful precisely because they cater to the preference of Mexican-American consumers for more intimate, personalized shopping environments in which the economic and social domains of life are not as markedly separate as they are in the mainstream Anglo-American society. Shopping, as Miller (1998, 2001) has shown, rather than being a strictly individualistic pursuit, is a highly social activity concerned with the establishment and maintenance of family ties and other relationships. This analysis is particularly apropos for family-oriented El Paso and its numerous 'mom-and-pop' restaurants and grocery stores.

Food is also purchased at the generically labelled 'Dollar Stores,' variously named 'Family Dollar,' 'General Dollar,' '99¢,' 'Señor Dollar,' etc. which dot the El Paso landscape.<sup>14</sup> The stores often smell strongly of plastic, the inexpensive material that, combined with low wage rates in China, allows the products to be marketed so cheaply. The 'Dollar Stores' sell a full range of general merchandise including packaged food, vitamins, cosmetics, clothing, kitchen and household items, etc. Much of downtown El Paso is devoted to stores selling similar products, especially inexpensive clothing, as well as electronics, toys, perfume, etc. to low-income Juárez shoppers and local Mexican-Americans.<sup>15</sup> Some El Paso shoppers also go across the border into Juárez for food bargains at chain supermarkets and superstores like SMart or Futurama or the stalls at the Cuauthémoc Market or local flea markets where prices are considerably lower than in mainstream stores.

Cash-strapped shoppers can obtain short-term loans from dozens of 'finance' companies, albeit at usurious interest rates. The most famous of these loan-shark operations is 'Tío Dinero,' whose schlocky commercials display a man decked out in a flowery Hawaiian shirt and draped in gold necklaces and bracelets thrusting a handful of large denomination greenbacks at the television viewer while crooning a lively jingle: 'who will lend

you money, your Tío, Tío, Tío Dinero.' Such exploitative institutions clearly demonstrate the limitations and inequalities that restrict the consumption habits of poor Mexican-Americans (Dohan, 2003). However, I argue that, despite inequalities, Mexican-Americans are very much immersed in a complex consumer economy even at the lowest levels of consumption.<sup>16</sup>

## FOOD AND CULTURE AT MEXICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY PARTIES IN EL PASO

Family parties concerned with life cycle rituals are a critical element of Mexican-American social practices. In El Paso today, the food choices and cultural styles displayed at these events illustrate processes of hybridity and contradiction that are part of constantly changing repertoires of Mexican-American identities vis-à-vis the consumer market and mainstream culture. One's stereotypical image of a Mexican-American birthday party might include a piñata as the central attraction. Contemporary Mexican-American birthdays in El Paso may still involve piñata-breaking but the most visible aspect of the party is likely to be a giant jumping balloon (*brinca-brinca*) rented for a fee of \$50 or much more. A disco system with a disk jockey booming out current hits could also overshadow the piñata set-up. Indeed, the jumping balloon is rapidly replacing the piñata as the central event of Mexican-American birthday celebrations.

If the birthday party takes place at Peter Piper Pizza restaurants, there will be no piñata at all. Each weekend these pizza parlors are completely full with birthday celebrants. They have become a ubiquitous part of working-class Mexican-American birthday parties in El Paso. At the pizza parties children will play video games and other pay-for-play amusements in the arcade. The food will be pizza, soft drinks, Budweiser beer and cake.

At the home birthday parties, the standard menu consists of brisket, potato or macaroni salad, canned nacho cheese (or *chile con queso*), large cakes with cartoon or movie motifs, and Budweiser or Bud Light beer. Mountains of gifts placed on the table, typically elaborately wrapped or placed in fancy gift bags, are a critical element of the festivities. Often there is so much food that each family leaves with an extra plate to take home. Between 50 and 100 people may be in attendance, especially for large families with many local relatives, numerous co-workers and fictive kin. A family of a five-year-old child could easily spend more than \$500 for their child's party. Often the parties are videotaped for later viewing.

At a recent housewarming party I attended hosted by the Rivera family, I observed culturally stylized processes that creatively blended aspects of Mexican and American culture, unlike the more crassly commercial pizza

parlor parties. The Rivera family came to El Paso from Aguascalientes to work in the cotton fields along the Río Grande. The male members of the family eventually became truck drivers which allowed the family to tear down most of the walls (the few solid ones were preserved) of their small adobe house and construct a 'modern' looking suburban style home in its place. Externally the house resembles much of the tract housing on El Paso's populous eastside. Inside there is a new refrigerator and a living room with a large television and sofa. There are even pictures of John Wayne and Western gunfighters on the walls. But as I entered the house through the kitchen carrying a huge pot of *frijoles rancheros* I was immediately confronted with distinctive cultural practices.

Mrs Rivera was in charge of a whole gang of female relatives, neighbors and friends who were loading Styrofoam plates with food from an overloaded dining room table to serve the approximately one hundred guests who were crowded together at metal tables in the small backyard. The women coordinated their activities smoothly as the same females, in reciprocal fashion, have helped with the cooking and serving at each other's family functions for years. They constantly joked with each other in Spanish and Spanglish. (One joke concerned Mrs Rivera's 'funny' English – she recently asked a friend, 'Are you going to "*pintar*" [that is, "dye,"] your hair?') About 20 children played together in large sex-segregated groups in the front yard and streets while the adult males and other women ate and drank in the back. Lest one conclude that a macho ethic prevailed (i.e., with women doing all the work and men in charge), it should be noted that the (Mexican and Mexican-American) men in attendance did considerable child care and the highlight of the party was an hour-long performance by a (rare) female mariachi group that serenaded the crowd with traditional Mexican ballads.

The food menu consisted of the aforementioned beans, tostadas with melted cheese, fiery *chile de arbol* sauce, macaroni salad, a large cake from a Mexican bakery, barbecued brisket, tequila and Bud Light. While the external symbolic meaning of the house architecture, furnishings, and some of the food items might be associated with mainstream US culture, these items were used and consumed within a densely-woven fabric of family and community interaction found throughout rural Mexico. The party represented the Rivera family 'making it' in American society, but this did not require relinquishment of basic components of their linguistic practices, styles of socializing, family and communal dynamics, and dietary choices but rather their blending and juxtaposition with 'American' styles of consumption and living.

Unlike the Mexican-American functions, birthdays for Anglo children on the wealthier, heavily white westside of El Paso seldom rival the Mexican-American parties in terms of complexity or numbers of invited guests. A Mexican-American woman I interviewed, who is known for the lavishness of her family parties, stressed that the large number of children at El Paso birthday parties are best entertained with a jumping balloon rather than more traditional, but less compelling forms of play. The typical menu of brisket, macaroni or potato salad, and nacho cheese was adopted, she said, because it requires much less work for women food preparers than does 'traditional' Mexican cuisine. Likewise, she said Peter Piper Pizza birthdays were more appealing to women because it meant less work for them and more available time to spend with their, often large, families, as well as providing abundant entertainment for children.

It is evident that these culturally stylized birthday gatherings and other parties represent a kind of *echando la casa por la ventana*, i.e., a public display of wealth and spending money as a positive value – as opposed to a Protestant/Calvinist/Puritan ethic that might view them as inappropriately lavish or wasteful.<sup>17</sup> In Carrier's terms (1995: ix), influenced by Mauss and Marx, they also represent reciprocal circulation networks for the exchange of gifts and strengthening of social ties among friends and kinsmen. It would be elitist to deride such consumption practices by relatively poor people, many of them enjoying such comparative luxuries for the first time, as superficial, materialistic, etc. Many of the families that throw such big parties for their children are unable to afford the large, stylish homes occupied by West El Paso Anglos. In that sense, the expensive birthday parties are a kind of 'compensatory compensation' vis-a-vis more costly consumer purchases such as fashionable new cars and homes in well-appointed suburbs (Chinoy, 1955). Moreover, for strongly family-oriented individuals spending large amounts of money on their children and other relatives within a family/community context is a positive good whose monetary cost is secondary.

It is not essentialist reductionism to state that there is a strong connection between Mexican-American values emphasizing familial solidarity and sociability (related to what Carrier (1995) calls the 'situated self') and the growing size and expense of El Paso parties among upwardly mobile working-class people. It is also important to note that at these birthday parties, and most settings in which consumption activities occur in El Paso, Mexican-Americans are the numerical majority, if not the large majority of the population. Given such a setting, ethnographic analysis requires an approach that transcends the rhetoric of victimization, oppression, and

exploitation often used to characterize Latinos (Dávila, 2001; Dohan, 2003). There is no doubt that Anglo-American society has inflicted many wounds on Chicano people. But a one-dimensional analysis that reduces Mexican-Americans to victims only adds insult to injury. It also limits our ability to comprehend the rich creative dynamics of ethnic identity and self-expression involved in Mexican-American consumer styles.

## RESTAURANTS

The cultural complexities and 'perplexities' (Ramamurthy, 2003) of food production and consumption in predominantly Mexican-American El Paso were vividly exemplified in a discussion of efforts by Mexican owners (the Nathals) to expand into the El Paso market: 'Sooner or later, many successful Juárez restaurateurs try their hand in El Paso. There, they find out the sister cities are like night and day' (Gilot, 2003).

On one hand, according to Gilot, the Nathal restaurant family lamented that the El Paso consumers did not prefer traditional Mexican foods:

The Nathals were also bewildered by their new clientele. Unlike Juarenses, El Pasoans didn't care much for cakes, preferring cinnamon rolls and bread. Americans [in this context including Mexican-Americans; authors' note] weren't impressed by made-from-scratch items. They didn't go for coffee and cake after work, but rather for sandwiches at lunch. [2003: 4F]

On the other hand, in the same article, José Contreras, spokesman for the Juárez Chamber of Commerce, observed that 'The big appeal is the Latino market. They want food they eat in Mexico . . .' [2003: 4F].

So what do Mexican-Americans want – American or Mexican food? Bread or tortillas? My Mexican-Americans informants repeatedly stated that they want both and hybrid mixtures of each, but without necessarily compartmentalizing their food consumption into discrete, essentialized ethnic categories. As Ramamurthy (2003: 525) has shown in south India,<sup>18</sup> consumers in the globalized world may experience 'perplexity' – 'a series of processes that often overwhelm subjects.' For Ramamurthy (2003: 525), perplexity 'is the meeting point where multiple ideologies that constitute the subject – cultural practices, temporalities, and place – conjoin and diverge.' I argue that creativity and perplexity, rather than simple rejection or embracement of Anglo-American consumerism, may characterize Mexican-American consumer decisions.

An enormous restaurant market has emerged in El Paso that ranges from the most 'authentic' Mexican food at Café Mayapán (run by laid off

garment workers) and small burrito parlors to the assembly-line smorgasbord of Pancho's Mexican Buffet (in Ritzer's terminology, a locally-controlled producer of 'nothing'). Café Mayapán illustrates the complexity and richness of Mexican-American food culture. Female garment workers, who lost their jobs as a result of NAFTA, founded the Café in a former factory building in 2001, and named it after an important Post-Classic Maya site.<sup>19</sup> Culturally 'authentic' Maya glyphs and images of Maya kings adorn the walls. An artisans' market of select Mexican arts and crafts adjacent to the restaurant is a secondary source of income for the ex-sewing machine operators turned small businesspeople and café workers. The menu contains foods from the interior of Mexico that are relatively uncommon in the El Paso area such as *salpicón* and *sopa azteca*. The airy open feeling of the long rectangular dining area, converted from the factory floor, is complemented by an elevated stage on which musical and cultural performances, including neo-Aztec dance exhibitions, take place. The combination of moderately priced non-mainstream Mexican food (at least for the border area), progressive politics and arts and crafts at Café Mayapán has had considerable appeal among the local intelligentsia and working-people of El Paso.

In between the extremes of the hip 'appropriation' of indigenous culture and popular Mexican cuisine at Café Mayapán and the bland corporate mass production of Pancho's Mexican Buffet lies a meeting place for Mexican-American youth and elders, Chico's Tacos, which exemplifies many of the themes discussed in this article.

## CHICO'S TACOS

Chico's Tacos was founded in the early 1950s on Alameda Street in the heart of the southside Mexican-American community of El Paso in a small Quonset hut. The restaurant serves a simple menu consisting of hamburgers, hotdogs, burritos and, most importantly, the trademark Chico's Tacos. The business's logo on a sign in front of the restaurant contains a young 'Mexican' man wearing a comical stylized yellow sombrero. His clothing is splashed with green and red, the colors of the Mexican national flag. In one hand he holds a waxed paper dish of tacos and the other hand flashes the 'okay' sign (an 'American' hand gesture). Today, all five Chico's restaurants have the same plate glass windows and neon lights all around them, which function as free advertising and enhance the view and dining pleasure of the customers.

From the time they open at 9 am until closing at 1:30 am the restaurants are packed with customers – including large families, groups of co-workers



(especially of Hispanic women) from local schools, hospitals and businesses – such that in the evening a security guard arrives to maintain order and safety. The flat, square brick restaurant buildings with ample parking on three sides are unadorned inside. A few jukeboxes, videogames, or small vending machines are the extent of interior decorations, yet an intensely sociable atmosphere pervades the restaurants. Patrons sit at simple plastic benches and tables aligned in straight rows. The food is served on paper plates, waxed paper trays, and cardboard boxes with plastic utensils – all disposable. Customers approach a long metal counter to place their order from the basic menu advertised on a sign overhead. Often the line of customers stretches from the counter to the entrance door and seats are at a premium such that 10 or more customers may have to stand to wait for their order.

The main attraction of Chico's is extremely inexpensive fast food served with a hot jalapeño chile sauce in small plastic cups. The following gives an indication of the low prices of Chico's food: hamburger 95¢, order of three tacos \$1.26, burrito \$1.16, coffee 50¢. The tacos consist of cooked hamburger meat hand-rolled in a corn tortilla and fried, then frozen, and sold the next day. Chico's Tacos are served in a one-inch deep pool of plain (non-spicy) red tomato sauce served piping hot and smothered in grated American cheese that slowly melts in the sauce and forms a gluey mass. Restaurant patrons pour copious quantities of the jalapeño sauce over the tacos to provide added flavor, because otherwise they would be quite insipid, and eat them with a plastic spoon, fork and fingers. Chile sauce is also spread on the hamburgers, hot dogs, French fries, burritos (beans and meat only), fish sandwiches, and cheese sandwiches. Drinks consist of Coke, and other Coca-Cola products, and coffee. These items round out the very limited menu, which is sold without variation from morning until after midnight.

Aside from the hotdog, which is served with 'chile beans' (spiced pinto beans as used in *chile con carne*), the basic fare could be found at the majority of El Paso restaurants aside from Mexican or other 'ethnic' restaurants that do not serve hamburgers and hot dogs. But as Miller (1994: 320) observed in a study of Trinidad, the important issue for identity is how foods are consumed: 'It is the consumption of apples and grape [in this case hot dogs, hamburgers, etc.] not their production, nor their origins, which defines what they are.' Despite the blandness of the food (with the exception of the green chile sauce) and the unusual presentation of the 'tacos,' Chico's Tacos has a huge and loyal following among Mexican-Americans, particularly, as well as many Mexicans and a lesser number of Anglo-Americans.

El Pasoans who move to other American cities frequently receive care packages of Chico's Tacos through the mail or when returning to El Paso for brief visits purchase large amounts of Chico's food which they freeze or carry back to their new homes in coolers for later consumption. The story of departed El Pasoans craving Chico's Tacos is recited frequently by their stay-at-home family members or mentioned nostalgically in letters to the editor of the *El Paso Times*.

When I asked a manager of one of the Chico's Tacos what kind of food he served and whether it was ethnically Mexican, American, or Mexican-American, the man (originally from Juárez but residing in El Paso for many years), replied, jokingly but pejoratively, '*una pocha inventó esa madre*' ['a border person invented this crap']. The food, he said, was neither Mexican, nor American, but Mexican-American. The main appeal of the restaurant, in his opinion, was that it was the cheapest food in El Paso. Dining at Chico's Tacos is considered by local Mexican-Americans as a quintessentially El Paso experience, although many recent immigrants scoff at the food for being 'not Mexican.' Inability to understand the idiosyncrasies of local Mexican-American consumer tastes, as embodied by the Chico's Tacos, led to the failure of Del Taco franchises (a California-based chain) in El Paso.

Chico's Tacos has ritual significance for high school students and other youth who stop there to eat and hang out after football games, dances, and drinking parties. The local cultural specificity of Chico's is such that the Mora family's attempt to expand the business to Albuquerque failed after only one year. According to a knowledgeable inside informant, fear of failure and possible ridicule by upper-class white residents has prevented the family from expanding to the westside of El Paso (the wealthiest and 'whitest' part of town). All five restaurants are located in the heavily Mexican-American/Mexican south, central, east and northeast sides of town.

Sensitivity to the perceived low social status of Chico's Tacos is reflected in self-mocking statements El Pasoans make about certain people eating too often at Chico's. One local youth who frequently goes to Chico's described the restaurant's cuisine, laughingly, as 'pre-manufactured soul food'. A Mexican-American businessman said to me, with a chuckle, that 'when out-of-town clients come I always reserve a table for them at Chico's Tacos.' Comedian Paul Rodríguez joked on El Paso radio in summer 2003 that 'Anglos have McDonald's, but Mexicans have Chico's Tacos.' El Pasoan Rafael Nuñez quipped that local people go to Chico's Tacos because they are cheap and do not care about quality food, only quantity:

if you just put the food out on a *batea con desperdicios y todo* [trough with food and wastes and everything] and said *orales cabrones a comer* [time to eat, assholes], they would come and eat just as long as it was cheap and plentiful.

These humorous comments express the ambivalent feelings of minority consumers that Ramamurthy (2003) calls 'perplexity'. Self-deprecating jokes and concerns about low status, however, do not prevent thousands of customers from frequenting Chico's Tacos and filling the restaurants to capacity daily.

For poor people, cheap, reasonably tasty fast food, like the tacos served at Chico's, is more highly valued than it is by middle and upper class individuals who have the luxury of avoiding or disdaining it. Although Chico's Tacos is actually less expensive than McDonald's – a fact reported to me by numerous informants – like McDonald's the restaurant is part of economic processes affecting people worldwide. For example, the famous taco of Chico's Tacos is a classic example of 'glocalization' – the mix of global and local to create something new (Ritzer, 2004; Robertson, 1992). On one hand, the Chico's 'taco' is a somewhat simplified, standardized, denatured version of 'indigenous' Mexican tacos 'to make it the kind of time-less generic product that chains like Taco Bell can market around the world' (Ritzer, 2004: 103). On the other hand, Chico's tacos are hand-rolled daily by 'real people,' and eaten within a distinctive sauce in an idiosyncratic way (tacos swimming in a deep pool of tomato sauce with huge piles of grated cheese on top) by a primarily local clientele in a neighborhood setting.

Instead of attempting to franchise the restaurant or modify its basic fare, unchanged for 50 years, the owners have adopted a conservative approach expanding only recently to a fifth location on the populous eastside and suing a former employee who tried to imitate the trademark green chile sauce and open a copycat version of Chico's. Despite the 'Americanized' appearance that perplexes many observers and some consumers, Chico's Tacos is a thriving Mexican-American business with a mainly Mexican-American clientele which has prospered in the border environment. Numerous other local (non-chain) restaurants, such as Good Luck Café, Hamburger Hut, Lucky Café, etc. that combine American style fast food, grilled food or diner style décor with a menu that mixes hamburgers and hot dogs with enchiladas and menudo do a booming business throughout El Paso and are important social centers.

Mexican-American engagement with 'American' fast-food culture is

made rich and complex by the deeply ludic and improvisational elements of Mexican culture (Limón, 1994; Montuori, 2003).<sup>20</sup> This can be evidenced at restaurants and diners where Mexican-American youth may hang out much longer than is the norm (or was planned for in corporate headquarters), playing, sharing food ceremoniously, putting chile on burgers, piling up mountains of napkins, ordering much more food than they can consume, etc. and in other ways disrupting the quick in-and-out fast-food pattern of gringo life (Watson, 1997). Ritzer (2004: 43) discusses a similar phenomenon in East Asia, which, following Oldenburg (1989), he refers to as making a fast-food restaurant 'become a great good place'. Some El Paso diners and fast-food restaurants like Chico's Tacos have resisted becoming 'non-places' run by 'non-people' (Ritzer, 2004: 39-70) because of their rootedness in neighborhoods and the long tenures of many employees. For example, when I studied the Chico's Tacos outlet on Alameda Street, the woman who took my order had been working there for 28 years. Her supervisor has been continually employed at the restaurant for more than 30 years.

Another creative reworking of American fast-food is found at Taco Grill, appropriately located in a remodeled former McDonald's restaurant, now adorned with Mexican motifs and colors. The menu includes many items more common in Mexico City than the border, such as *tacos al pastor* (marinated pork slices mixed with red chile grilled on a spit and served on hot tortillas sprinkled with chopped onions and cilantro), 'authentic' *chilaquiles* (made with fried slices of tortillas, instead of tostada chips, and hot red chile sauce), *carnitas* (cubed pork chunks slow cooked in their own fat and juices), and *tacos de alambre* (seasoned beef with onions, long green chile and melted cheese). These and other Mexican delicacies are served in McDonaldized fashion using microphones, a drive-through window, and other high-efficiency equipment but in a distinctly 'Hispanic' social atmosphere of large families, customers eating slowly while socializing and joking, and other behaviors one associates with leisure rather than an eat-and-run lifestyle.

## CONCLUSIONS

In an article on American shopping culture, Zukin (2003; cf. Thompson et al., 1990) argues that mass access to consumer goods, what she calls 'bargain culture,' is a Faustian bargain because it has not promoted economic or social equality and has covered up other social costs such as the power of large corporations to negatively impact the environment or the high cost of health care:<sup>21</sup>

It is a social equality – of a sort: instead of reducing differences between the classes, we are satisfied to see them shopping in the same discount store. Instead of supporting local businesses we shop at giant chains. Instead of raising incomes, we lower prices. Americans have accepted bargain culture as our vision of democracy.

When the economy is uncertain, the appeal of bargain culture grows. But low prices are not really a bargain. They may allow us to shop more often, but they weaken our ability to pay the bill. (Zukin, 2003: A31)

There is much truth in Zukin's insightful analysis. Yet advances in consumer purchasing power and means of consumption are especially important to the poor and immigrant population (Ngai, 2003: 484). Elsewhere, Zukin (2004: 88) notes that discount stores did 'surround us with both democracy and humanity.' This is particularly significant for Mexican-Americans whose economic mobility is limited (Livingston and Kahn, 2002).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, ethnic minority group members are often acutely conscious of the economy of symbols and styles that permeate US consumer culture because they have to fight so hard for acceptance and equal treatment within it. Mexican-American youth ignore the US consumer world – perhaps the main currency of cultural identity in contemporary life – at their social status peril. Thus their mobilization, 'situational' use of, and 'co-production' of ethnic symbols is a highly charged process (García Canclini, 2001). Hence we should not downplay the greater access of working-class people to 'bargain culture'; at the same time we must call for a fairer and more equal distribution of wealth and social services.

Dávila (2001: 22), from another perspective, overstates the case for oppression of Hispanics by the Anglo-dominated consumer economy:

I argue that it is to US society's fears about its 'others' that ethnic marketing, not solely Hispanic marketing, responds and that in presenting such unrelenting images, ethnic marketing ends up responding to and reflecting the fears and anxiety of mainstream society, reiterating in this manner the demands for an idealized, good, all-American citizenship in the image of the 'ethnic consumer.'

Ethnic marketing hence becomes the interlocutor for these populations vis-a-vis mainstream America, the site that regulates and mediates its ethnics – the immigrant, the alien, the raced, and

the underclass – into their respective places within US racial and ethnic hierarchies. . . .

This interpretation, while illustrating processes of ethnic market segmentation, is too sweeping and categorical. Such a view – based on a study of national-level marketing – precludes the possibility of regional marketing by Mexican-Americans for Mexican-Americans. It cannot account for the grassroots vigor of the local business community and consumers in a ‘majority-minority’ border setting like El Paso, and many others in the American Southwest. Furthermore, despite exploitative relations of production and racial inequalities limiting and shaping consumption, *pace* Ngai (2003: 470), poor ‘ethnic’ worker/consumers still find ways to participate in the ‘postmodern play’ associated with modern consumption.

On the US-Mexico border, consumption behavior, rather than consisting of simple resistance or one-dimensional assimilation, may reflect ambivalence, flexibility and the non-fixed contradictory subject positions of populations without strong national loyalties or essential identities (Ramamurthy, 2003). Such attitudes, instead of merely upward mobility, ‘Americanization,’ or supposed social conservatism, may be behind the growing Hispanic Republican vote, such as recently in the 2004 presidential election. Consequently, although my analysis is strongly influenced by Miller’s brilliant work on mass consumption in Trinidad, I wish to avoid the pitfall of viewing creative consumer behavior as categorically liberating (cf. Miller, 1994: 322).

The growing entanglement of Mexican-Americans in US consumer culture is a double-edged experience that involves creative cultural elaboration and hybridity as well as growing credit card debt, ‘naturalization’ of consumer needs and desires, increased obesity and other health problems, excessive television watching, and confrontation with the limits of a race and class stratified society. By identifying creative patterns in Mexican-American consumer culture I am not ignoring the massive social inequalities that have afflicted Chicano people. Like Bartra’s *axolote*, the ancient Mexican amphibian he uses as a metaphor to analyze the changing politics of Mexican discourses of national identity, US consumer culture is both a source of self-fulfillment and a means through which Mexican-Americans become further enmeshed in a system of vastly unequal political power and economic inequality (Bartra, 1987).

## Notes

1. The title 'Chicano Lite' is meant to echo the playful absurdities and 'perplexities' (Ramamurthy, 2003) of modern marketing as in Krispy Kreme donuts, shopping Marts, Taco Cabana (with no ñ), and Tecate Lite. In local border parlance the term 'Lite' was adopted creatively to put down 'interlopers' from Mexico City ('Chilango Lite') or Chihuahua ('Chihuahua Lite'), but seen more frequently in the form of 'Bud Light,' a preferred beer at weekend parties throughout the predominantly Mexican-American eastside and Lower Valley of El Paso.

One of the most cogent early critics of US culture as something one purchases and consumes rather than a rich, historically rooted way of life was Terry Southern, the great novelist, screenwriter and satirist. Southern invented numerous foreshortened nicknames and hip abbreviations, like the 'Quality Lit Game' referring to the commercialized fiction market, to cope with the ironies and absurdities of postmodern living. According to Southern's biographer Lee Hill (2001: 95), the term Quality Lit Game expressed the writer's 'ambivalence toward the somewhat unholy blurring of commerce, careerism, and politics with lofty literary aspirations.' As used here the term Chicano Lite reflects my attempt to come to grips with the intersection of commerce and culture in Mexican-American life today.

Throughout the article Spanish or Spanglish expressions will be italicized. I would like to thank Ana Martínez and Joe Heyman for their assistance with this research.

2. Works and authors that have influenced anthropological thinking on these matters include Baudrillard (1975), Belk (1999), Bourdieu (1984), Campbell (1997), Douglas and Isherwood (1996), Miller (1994, 1997) and Ritzer (2000).
3. This research is based on 12 years of general observations of life in El Paso and eight months of intensive inquiry (including numerous site observations and approximately 40 interviews) during the period of May to December 2003, during which time I enjoyed a faculty development leave from the University of Texas at El Paso whose support I acknowledge. The fieldwork included attendance at (and sponsorship of) family parties on approximately 50 occasions and shopping or dining at the establishments mentioned on a regular basis over a 12-year period.
4. The term 'Mexican-American' is used throughout the article to refer primarily to US citizens of Mexican cultural origin. The term 'Chicano' is highly controversial in El Paso. It is frequently rejected by the working-class people who are the subject of this study, despite the widespread popularity of the term in various parts of California and elsewhere and among intellectuals. I recognize that other terms such as 'Latino' (seldom used in El Paso), 'Hispanic' (more common locally), 'Mexican' (used more often to refer to Mexican nationals) or *Mexicano* (also common) could also be employed. For consistency's sake, 'Mexican-American' will be used in the article.
5. This article mainly concerns working-class Mexican-Americans, the vast majority of the El Paso population. The consumer habits of middle and upper class Mexican-Americans would also be an interesting research topic, but it will have to be addressed in future work.
6. Ramamurthy (2003: 525) uses the term 'perplexity' to refer to 'the tension

- between overlapping, opposing, and asymmetric forces or fields of power. Perplexity indexes the puzzlement of people as they experience both the joys and aches of the global everyday, often simultaneously.' For Mexican-Americans, and other residents of border zones, 'perplexity' may emerge in relation to the ambiguous status of emergent, hybrid customs and practices. In the El Paso/Juárez border area this is manifested in a perennial debate about whether an element of culture is 'Mexican,' 'Mexican-American' or 'Anglo.'
7. Extensive information on health problems within the Mexican-American community, such as rising obesity rates linked to adopting US dietary and lifestyle patterns, is located on the CDC official website ([www.CDC.gov](http://www.CDC.gov)).
  8. According to the 2000 US Census El Paso county was 78.2 percent Hispanic (statistics courtesy of Cheryl Howard, University of Texas-El Paso demographer).
  9. This comment was taken from an endorsement blurb in the 2003 HarperCollins Latino and Latin American Studies catalogue.
  10. I use the word 'potlatch' somewhat loosely, given that in a Northwest Coast aboriginal context the 'potlatch' was concerned with gift-giving on a large-scale rather than showy personal or familial consumption. I simply wish to highlight the cultural construction of conspicuous consumption in this case.
  11. Free translations with the English words of the original in bold type: 'What do you think of the music, nice, yes?'; 'He made us laugh a lot last night; that explains why I have this kind of Mickey Mouse voice.' The expression '*beernes*' is a play on words referring to Friday as a good day to drink beer.
  12. Typical examples of the blending of Spanish and English follow '*deje \$50 en cash y pague el resto en abonos*'; '*disminuye sus bilés mensuales con credit counseling*'; '*con amplio estacionamiento para parquiar su carro*.' It is difficult to convey in a short paper the subtlety and linguistic complexity of El Paso Spanglish in a consumer setting; however one more example may help. 'Matute' is the star radio personality of Spanglish-oriented 97.5 FM. During Easter, Matute made the joking remark: '*recuerden que ahora no se come la carníe*' ['*carníe*' pronounced with a distinct 'American' pronunciation in mocking reference to Mexican-American Anglicizing of Spanish words: '*carníe*' is an Anglicized pronunciation of the Spanish '*carne*' (meat)]. A dedicated 97.5 listener told me that Spanglish is employed by announcers because the listening audience understands it and identifies with it.
  13. In that sense, Stavans' (2003) adoring analysis of this rich linguistic form is apposite. However, Stavans fails to address the limiting, stigmatizing dimensions of Spanglish.
  14. The proliferation of extremely inexpensive goods from China in a mind-boggling range of colors and styles and the expansion of businesses targeting the low-income border population provide access to cheap consumer products for even the poorest El Pasoans. Ritzer (2004: 160-1) argues that the poorest of poor consumers are unable to afford the mass-manufactured, non-indigenous products he refers to as 'nothing.' Aside from the lowest economic strata, however, most local residents can afford to purchase at least some of the cheap Chinese knock-off products, second-hand 'nothing' products from thrift stores, and clothes-by-the-pound stores available along the US-Mexico border. While hardly a match in glitziness with the new 'cathedrals of consumption' analyzed by Ritzer



- (1999), the 'Dollar Stores' provide poor people with what they need at rock-bottom prices. Informants repeatedly stressed comparatively low prices (as compared to the prices of larger outlets like Target and Wal-Mart) as the reason why they shopped at the 'Dollar Stores.'
15. Options for purchasing economical clothing are especially abundant and include Goodwill and other thrift stores, flea markets, yard sales, low-end discount stores, and clothing by the pound (*ropa por libra*) stores that sell the flotsam and jetsam of the bloated US consumer market to local people at rock-bottom prices. The market for cheap clothing in El Paso is so large that an estimated five tons of used clothing is exported from El Paso to Juárez, Mexico every day (*El Diario* 11/12/03).
  16. A common and graphic response to consumer inequalities is the 'beer run' or 'gasoline run' that plague El Paso merchants and cops or the frequent practice at El Paso supermarkets of extensive sampling, consuming, or stealing merchandise without paying, typical examples of what De Certeau (1984) calls '*la perruque*' (French equivalent of the American expression 'rip-off') (*El Paso Times* 2/26/04).
  17. On 'non-ascetic' consumption patterns in the Caribbean, see Miller (1994: 193–6). It is noteworthy that Fabens, Texas (in the predominantly Lower Valley of El Paso), one of the poorest towns in the El Paso area, is known for some of the most lavish Fourth of July fireworks and Christmas light decorations.
  18. The globalization of Chinese food has also produced intriguing hybrids (Wu and Chee-beng, 2001; Wu and Cheung, 2002).
  19. Mayapán is reputed to have been founded by the ruler Kukulcán during the end of the pre-Hispanic period of Maya cultural development.
  20. An interesting example of playful appropriation of consumer culture in El Paso was the widespread acceptance of 'Homies,' plastic caricatures of cholo gangsters that were harshly denounced by Chicano intellectuals in California (on 'ethnically-correct dolls,' see Chin, 2001). A perhaps somewhat less imaginative ('more assimilationist') approach to US pop culture was the tremendous popularity of the Dallas Cowboys football team among El Paso Mexican-Americans.
  21. In an article called 'Consumer Dominance Hits a 54-Year High,' Norris (2003) notes that food and clothing prices in the USA have declined over the last 50 years whereas health costs have increased.
  22. According to Livingston and Kahn (2002: 1010): 'the average wages of third-generation Mexican-American respondents still fall more than 25 percent below the wages of comparable non-Hispanic whites.'

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