Published in final edited form as:

Symb Interact. 2016 February ; 39(1): 66–85. doi:10.1002/symb.218.

Comiendo Bien: The Production of *Latinidad* through the Performance of Healthy Eating among Latino Immigrant Families in San Francisco

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Abstract

Utilizing a *bricolage* of interactionist cultural studies, ethnic foodways, and situational analysis this paper examines how Latino immigrants, representing six countries and multiple preimmigration class positions, come to perform *Latinidad* through the lay health practice of *comiendo bien* (eating well). *Comiendo bien* was examined through participant observation of 15 families living in San Francisco and 27 key informant interviews. *Comiendo bien* is a performance that exists through the convergence of multiple identity positions. Latina/o immigrants not only enact the *Latinidad* in the United States through artistic expression or political strategizing, but also by sharing an idealized practice of healthy eating.

Keywords

foodways; identity formation; Latinas/os; performance; race; ethnicity

Latina/o Studies scholars assert that the *Latino* panethnic label in the United States should be eradicated because it is a label enforced by government agencies (Flores 2000; Oboler 1995) and imposed by U.S. biomedicine (Santiago-Irizarry 2001), media and advertising executives (Dávila 2012), and academics. However, there is a lack of scholarship that documents “how common folk [Latinos] define themselves in transnational settings” (Duany 2003:257), with the exception of Ricourt and Danta’s (2003) ethnographic study of Latino immigrants in Corona, Queens. Latino consciousness and identity formation, or *Latinidad*, has largely been examined in the empirical setting of political strategizing in social movements, that resist economic and political marginalization in the United States, or fomenting alternative media and artistic expression that resist homogeneous and problematic representations of Latinos. Rarely has the production of *Latinidad* been examined in mundane, everyday experiences. There is a need to use symbolic interactionist approaches to

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

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examine identity construction among diverse Latino immigrants because it takes into consideration agency and encourages the examination of mundane activities.

This study presents findings from a situational analysis that examined the lay health practice of *comiendo bien* (eating well in Spanish), among Latino immigrant families in San Francisco. The goal is to demonstrate that symbolic interactionist approaches to performance, particularly that of Anselm Strauss (1993), who asserts the importance of examining how organizations and institutions shape performance and representations, could facilitate understanding how *Latinidad* is created, negotiated, and performed through shared and contested practices like *comiendo bien* among diverse, Latino immigrants.

I developed an interest to study *comiendo bien* from a 2004 pilot study investigating how Latina immigrant mothers residing in San Francisco distinguish practices of women's health from general health. *Comiendo bien* was an *in vivo* code that emerged when I asked participants, "What does a woman do to stay healthy?" All of their responses contained these two words, *comiendo bien*. One particular participant, Mona,¹ drew my attention to *comiendo bien* by discussing its importance in maintaining the family's health.

And so when there is an obese little girl, from the time she is baby, the one who is to blame is the mother because she is the one who gives to eat, because she is the one that gives care, because she is the one that gives. What happens? That child goes on growing and that child will be passed on those habits ... she is the one creating lives. Yes, so you want to believe it or not, the woman is always responsible.

Comiendo bien surfaced through these interviews in the context of feeding the family. It was implicated in gender, class, and transnational processes. Moreover, my interest to understand how *healthy eating* is accomplished was not fulfilled by existing literature. For example, to assess Latino immigrants' diets, health researchers primarily measure Latinos' consumption of macronutrients. The social, cultural, emotional, and contextual elements of the diet are often absent in acculturation and diet research conducted by sociologists (e.g., Akresh 2007), as if people's social interactions with others are insignificant when they eat. Although humanities researchers have examined national and regional foodways among Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos, it has usually been limited to one specific nationality or geographic space (e.g., Counihan 2009; Dunn 2014; Lee Pérez and Abarca 2007; Pilcher 2004; 2012). Much less has been written about *how* U.S. Latina/o immigrants accomplish healthy eating and how these lay health practices transform across borders. Moreover, healthy eating has not been a context for such an interactionist analysis on the formation of *Latinidad*.

The study will be organized by first comparing symbolic interactionist performance to poststructuralist performativity; the latter being the most frequently used theoretical approach to examine Latino identity formation. Interactionist performance and performativity have overlapping features, but interactionist performance differs with respect to creation, agency and how organizations and institutions shape performance and

¹ Pseudonyms that the participants chose are used throughout the manuscript.

representation. Second, I will provide a processual description of the structural conditions and discourses that shape *comiendo bien* to demonstrate how these participants construct *Latinidad* through their shared performance of eating and preparing meals. I end by discussing how interactionist performance can expand the examination of *Latinidad* because it encourages the examination of identity formation through reflexive subjects' mundane acts. This article will not focus on the nutrition discourses shaping *comiendo bien* because there are multiple positions these families take to perform "healthy" eating, which is beyond this paper. That specific analysis is discussed elsewhere (Martínez 2015). Despite the diverse representations of health, these families still reproduced performative aspects of *comiendo bien* in their diet.

PERFORMANCE IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND PERFORMATIVITY IN LATINO STUDIES

The examination of *Latinidad* has been important for several reasons. First, persons from Spanish and Latin American descent are the U.S. racial/ethnic minority majority, and this population continues to grow. Second, the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States has become more diverse in terms of national origins (more Central and South Americans, as well as non-Spanish speaking indigenous groups). Third, like the author and five families in the present study, more self-identifying Latino families are unions between Latin Americans from two different countries. Scholars and policy makers alike question whether these diverse groups will align and unify (Beltrán 2010) and how these particularities and intersectionalities are important (Alcoff 2006; Zambrana 2011).

Latino Studies scholars have often used performance as a metaphor and analytic tool to examine the construction and enactment of *Chicanismo* (Fordham-Hernández 2009) *Latinidad* (Chávez 2009), gender (Mendible 2007) and queer identity (Muñoz 1999; Rodríguez, 2003). The examination of performance has largely been relegated to the examination of plays (Román and Sandoval 1995), films (Aparicio 2003), television shows (Sowards and Pineda 2011), underground performances (Danielson 2009; Muñoz 1999), and literature (Sánchez 2005) written, produced, and performed by Latina/o artists who often remain excluded from the mainstream media and art world. In fact, most of these scholars adapt a poststructuralist, Butlerian (1990; 1993) approach to performativity.

For instance, by using Judith Butler's performativity as laid out in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Jonathan Inda (2000) proposes to create a framework for racial performativity to describe the construction of the racialized, Chicano body. Inda (2000:74) writes, "race is the effect of discourse." Racializing subjects is done through performativity, or the process by which normative discourses are repeating through action and become reified through their repetition. Poststructuralist approaches, such as Butler's, have facilitated scholars' approach to examine Latina/o identity as a malleable enactment, particularly how bodies of knowledge, constitute racial/ethnic positions.

Media and artistic social worlds are excellent settings from which to examine the construction of marginalized identities because it is often through art that people feel most free to resist the status quo, or present their many selves. However, symbolic interactionists

would also assert that resistance to stigmatized positions occurs in everyday life (Goffman 1963), and for this reason, there is value examining how Latino immigrants construct *Latinidad* through their daily eating practices. With the exception of Kotarba, Fackler and Nowotny (2009), who describe how the emerging Latino music scenes in Houston provides sites for self, identity, and nationality, scholars have rarely utilized interactionist approaches to examine *Latinidad*. This may be because poststructuralist approaches are more prevalent in the humanities where much of this scholarship originates. It could also be that there are few Latina/o scholars formally trained in symbolic interactionism. Nevertheless, symbolic interactionism's approach to performance can contribute to understanding the construction of *Latinidad* because of its emphasis to examine everyday activities, agency in social action, and to focus on positive practices, not just racial/ethnic minority's deficits in the larger U.S. society.

Symbolic interactionists utilize *performance* to examine "the liminality and construction" of inequalities related to gender, race, or other structural positions (Denzin 2003:187), but I saw the benefit of using performance to analyze *comiendo bien* because key informants² strongly believed that *comiendo bien* could not be practiced by Latinas/os who were not partnered or living with family, because their eating habits were not accountable to another person. Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self* (1959) specifically focuses on the self that people put forward according to what they believe are others' expectations, or one's impressions of themselves that they wish to create. Unlike Goffman, Anselm Strauss (1993:172–173) focuses on representation as it moves away from analyzing just a single situation of interaction, and more of the multiple interactions that have a history (meanings repeated and modified simultaneously) and can be located within social structures and organizations. If Strauss's representation is applied to *comiendo bien*, the focus is not solely on carrying out the act in order to meet others' expectations of what they want to see us eat, but also to understand an actor's ability to symbolize a representation of collective identity. Representation thus considers how actors are symbols and/or agents of collectivities and how they try to perform "through non-ambiguous signs" (1993:170). The problem with interaction, such as enacting *comiendo bien*, is that multiple representations can be displayed simultaneously, not only in one single face-to-face interaction, but also with objects and organizations. Distinct from Goffman (1959), Strauss would also study how other organizations, meanings, and interactions shape the representation.

There has been critique vis-à-vis the usefulness of performativity in understanding enactments of identity, particularly with issues of agency and social change (Nelson 1999). However, both interactionist performance and performativity share parallels. For instance, they are both critical that gender or race can be attributed to essential human qualities, or that people merely play out human roles (Moloney and Fenstermaker 2002:192). Although both perspectives emphasize activity, for interactionists, structural positions are an outcome of people's interactive, reflexive "doing," while Butler's activity emphasizes how subjects become gendered through discursive activity (Brickell 2003).

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².Key informants were persons who were responsible for purchasing and preparing meals for their family.

BRICOLAGE OF INTERACTIONIST CULTURAL STUDIES, SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS, AND ETHNIC FOODWAYS

This examination of *comiendo bien* draws from interactionist cultural studies (ICS; Denzin 1992), the framework for examining continuity and change in ethnic foodways (Goode, Theophano and Curtis 1984), and the analytic techniques of situational analysis (Clarke 2005). ICS examines how objects are given meanings and enacted through these meanings by critically engaging questions of subjectivity, politics, embodiment, and emotion. The emphasis is to understand how cultural products and texts are constructed, produced, and consumed.

As a supplement to constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998) the emphasis in situational analysis (Clarke 2005) is to examine how action among collectivities is created, transformed, and continued in the situation by examining multiple data sources, acknowledging heterogeneities in one's data, and recognizing that participants are embodied and situated (Clarke 2005). Situational analysis augments analytic techniques of grounded theory by mapping the nonhuman, human, and discursive elements present in the situation (situational mapping) and the discursive positions that participants take (positional mapping). Examining Latino immigrants' diets as social processes presents the participants as an ethnic group that enacts healthy eating through many identities, rather than as a list of foods that an ethnic group consumes.

Two nonprofit organizations, *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* (United and Active Women) and CARECEN (Central American Resource Center) assisted in the recruitment of families for this project. I posted recruitment flyers in these organizations stating that I was conducting a study examining family eating practices, along with my contact information. I did not to use the words "health" or "diet" on the flyer because I did not want to assume that *comiendo bien* represented health. I also made announcements about this study at these organizations, before their meetings commenced. I volunteered 6 hours a week at each organization in exchange for their assistance with recruitment. Volunteering allowed me to observe most of the participating families in a context outside of their home.

Describing *comiendo bien* is challenging because of the danger of homogenizing a group that is historically, culturally, linguistically, and racially complex, and sometimes incohesive. Therefore, it is important to describe how "Latino" immigrants were approached in this project. I decided to leave the label open until I discovered how my participants identified themselves and others of Latin American descent. In the recruitment flyers, I specifically stated that I was looking for families in which "the person responsible for buying and preparing food was an immigrant from a Spanish-speaking Latin American country," so as to not exclude anyone who did not identify with the labels "Hispanic" or "Latina/o." Ultimately, I chose "Latina/o" because this is the label that the participants used to identify themselves and other Spanish-speaking, Latin Americans residing in the United States. However, prior to migrating, participants identified themselves *vis-a-vis* their nationality. I use this label acknowledging my participants' regional and national differences.

I conducted two in-depth interviews with key informants and had three or more experiences of participant observation with each family. Key informants were persons 18 years or older, responsible for purchasing and preparing food for their family, and who migrated from one of the 21 Spanish-speaking, Latin American countries. The family cook was considered a key informant because they generally know what their family members like to eat and executed ethnic foodways in San Francisco. I used a semi-structured interview guide to gather information about the family's migration trajectory to the United States, beliefs and practices around eating, food, health, and food preparation preimmigration and during U.S. settlement. The key informant interviews took place in Spanish and were 60 to 90 minutes in length. The time between Time 1 and Time 2 interviews was usually 3 months. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Families in their multitude of formations (e.g., single parent, step-family, and fictive kin) were included in this sample because family life is accomplished irrespective of biological ties. Participant observation of the family meal took place months after completing key informant interviews to ensure that I had the families' trust. During the participant observations it was important to identify how families' observed eating practices differed from the key informants' description of *comiendo bien*. Field observation also provided information about how cooks negotiated family members' food preferences and how they negotiated interpretations of health into their cooking. Field observations were handwritten and transcribed soon after for later textual coding in *Atlas.ti* 5.2.

The Families

This description of *comiendo bien* is based on twenty-seven³ in-depth interviews and over 7 months of participant observation with 15 Latino immigrant families living in San Francisco between 2008 and 2010. The fifteen families represent six Latin American countries: El Salvador ($n = 3$), Guatemala ($n = 1$), Honduras ($n = 1$), Mexico ($n = 6$), Nicaragua ($n = 1$), and Peru ($n = 3$). There were five families in which parents were from two different countries, Mexico and El Salvador ($n = 3$), Mexico and Peru ($n = 1$), or Guatemala and Peru ($n = 1$). Eight of the key informants entered the United States between 1992 and 1999, while seven entered between 2000 and 2008 (See Table 1). Eighty-six percent of the mothers had worked in Latin America, while 50% of the mothers, exclusively from Peru and Central America, had some postsecondary education and were in semi-professional positions in Latin America. Although I did not collect specific data on class, the majority of the participants rented small apartments, one family lived in a trailer, and one family was transitionally housed in a shelter during the study, indicating that most were low-income families (see Table 1).

WHAT IS COMIENDO BIEN?

Structural Conditions Shaping Comiendo Bien

Comiendo bien is a practice that maintains physical and emotional wellbeing in order to reduce illness and the use of medical services. Many of these families had limited access to

³.Three Time 2 interviews could not be completed because the key informants' phones were dis-connected.

medical care in Latin America because of geographic or financial limitations. Limited access to medical care is one of the structural conditions that preserved *comiendo bien* in San Francisco. Specifically, many families lacked an even distribution of medical insurance within the family. If the children in these families were U.S. citizens they may have had publicly funded health insurance, but their parents were usually uninsured, undocumented, and/or lacked the funds and time to seek medical care. For example, Margarita's family of five from El Salvador, continued *comiendo bien* in San Francisco because they no longer had any health insurance. "Here, I feel that we are trying, with my husband, to eat healthier ... possibly because we do not count on a medical insurance. What we are trying to do is take care of our-selves to not go to the hospital for an emergency ..." Margarita and her husband demonstrate agency in their choice to improve their family's diet given their limited access to medical care.

In a few cases, some of the mothers were hesitant to use medical services because they were apprehensive of the price and ingesting chemicals that would have multiple side effects, like Lorena described below.

They [Latinas/os] will stay sick before going to the doctor; first, because the doctor is costly, because at times, there is no health insurance. And, because, apart from the medication, how much is it going to cost me? Is it going to cure me? Or, no? The chemicals are good, too, but they have secondary effects.

Like Lorena, Latino immigrants in this project were not practicing *comiendo bien* to resist the neoliberal medical system, if they had the access and resources they would actively seek medical services, but they were critical of the reductionist, pharmaceutical approach to healing provided by most U.S. healthcare providers.

Below, I provide a brief description of the participants' ideal representation of *comiendo bien* in order to situate the subsequent actions and discourses that will be discussed. The practice of *comiendo bien* is primarily imparted and led by mothers cooking, summoning their families' memories of dishes, and replicating their mothers' recipes to create a *platotóte*, an "abundant plate," which represented the structure of the meal that families ate to accomplish *comiendo bien*. The *platotóte* included a "starch" (rice, plantains, and/or tortillas), a "protein" (fish, poultry, eggs, pork, or red meat), "legumes" (beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas, etc.), and "vegetables or fruit" (salad as a garnish, boiled vegetables, or *chile*). They ate all of their food on one plate and in one course. In many cases, all of these foods could be combined in one-pot dishes such as *caldos* (heavy soups), and stews, in which vegetables, meat, legumes, and/or grains are cooked together. Ideally, the *platotóte* would be consumed twice to thrice a day.

Healthy foods were considered those that were natural, minimally processed, and homemade. In the enactment of *comiendo bien*, mothers and fathers are primarily responsible for visually gauging their family, in particular, their children's consumption of food on their plate. To eat everything on one's plate was considered a sign that they ate well. One's embodied accomplishment of *comiendo bien* was feeling full. More importantly, *comiendo bien* is accomplished when these meals are shared among family members or an intimate group.

It was questionable whether someone accomplished “eating well” if they ate alone. Margarita described how her husband ate his first years in San Francisco without her and the children:

Interviewer: Do you believe that Latino immigrants eat well in this country?

Margarita: Depending ... because let's say that among family, I believe, they eat well. But if we look at the situation of men, who are here alone, then they do not know where to start, they don't have anyone who could cook for them in their house, someone who would have a good meal waiting for them. And, possibly, outside, they buy food that they can start with, but emotionally, they do not eat well. So, how would I tell you? For example, my husband tells me that when he was alone many times, he would eat his meals, he could eat well, and everything, but to be alone, right? It is not that you will enjoy your food. He's thinking about his family ...

Commensality is the social experience of sharing meals with others (Mars 1997; Morrison 1996; Sobal and Nelson 2003) and it framed every cook's description of *comiendo bien*. Before migrating to the United States, participants described consuming meals commensally, among family, friends, or co-workers. Families are the core commensal units, although there are other units based on friendships and intimate relationships. In Latin America, most of the key informants and their partners were either single people living with their parents, or with their partner and child(ren). Living with others and having more opportunities for social engagement in Latin America facilitated sharing meals.

The event of sharing a meal with the family is a realization of *comiendo bien* because it is when parents' earnings are symbolized in the meal, family caregiving is displayed, and parental authority is enforced when family cooks monitor others' consumption. Through commensal interactions, individuals learn how to reproduce and monitor their own *comiendo bien*. The dinner table is also the stage where Latinos present their healthy and compliant self to their family members, particularly children to their mother. In San Francisco, migrating alone, working longer hours, and the conflicting schedules with other family members decreased commensality.

Another structural condition that shaped these families' Latin American sender communities was food insecurity, despite being employed. Food insecurity exists when people do not have physical or economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences (UNFAO 2009). Those participants from rural areas experienced the most repetition in their meals and the least experience eating outside of the home. These participants often dealt with food insecurity by buying affordable ingredients, such as beans and tortillas, and repeating dishes at multiple meals. The criterion to *eat everything* served on one's plate arises from conditions of food insecurity and limited opportunities to eat outside of meals. Key informants attributed the diverse structure of their *platotóte* to the importance of consuming a variety of foods for optimal health. However, the diverse and abundant contents of a *platotóte* may also stem from other experiences.

I used to be ashamed of taking out my refried bean sandwich [to school] where many would take out their ham sandwich and such and then they would ask me,

“Did you bring a sandwich?” And, I would tell them, “No.” And I, what I would do, is wrap the sandwich well and I would throw it in the garbage because I said, “How are they going to see me with a refried bean sandwich again?”

Prior to migration, restaurants were not a regular source of meals for any of these immigrants due to the high cost. Those from rural areas and others migrating before 1999 described not having many street vendors or food establishments in their communities. Not regularly eating food prepared outside of home, for reasons related to access and hygiene, may have shaped the condition in which eating processed food and food prepared outside of the home was not conducive to *comiendo bien*.

In their sender community, women were charged with cooking responsibilities depending on the amount of time spent outside of the home for employment. The mothers or eldest daughters in the family mainly prepared meals. However, if the mother or the eldest daughter were formally employed, they only had cooking responsibilities for certain meals during the day, or during their days off. Hence, the woman who worked the least amount of time outside of the home would prepare most meals for the family. Unlike much acculturation and diet research, which assumes that Latinos' diets deteriorate partly because Latina immigrants enter the U.S. workforce (Ayala, Baquero and Klinger 2008), there were eight mothers who bore the “double duty” (Hochschild 1989) of working and feeding their families in Latin America.

Mothers' reproduction of *comiendo bien* is generally expected because women often represent having innate abilities to assess what is good for their children. However, there can be transgressions in gendered activities tied to the reproduction of *comiendo bien* if mothers are not present in the family. There were two Salvadoran families in which the fathers assisted in food preparation. For example, Margarita's husband prepared healthier meals for the family because he enjoyed modifying recipes that alleviated his hypertension. In another example, when Veronica was growing up in El Salvador her father raised her. He assumed the feeding responsibilities and imparted healthy eating habits to his children in the absence of their mother or another woman. This demonstrates that Latinos are not incapable of feeding their families. The responsibility to feed and visually gauge fullness is reified and relegated to women, but certainly not concrete or immutable. During home visits, I also noticed instances where men could not cook, but helped purchase last minute items at a nearby market, or calmed unruly children while the mother was cooking. Men were often absent from cooking, both in Latin America and San Francisco, but always carried the responsibility to procure earnings and plan the menu.

Discourses Informing Comiendo Bien

Discourses are ways of representing various orders of truth through actions and speech (Foucault 1971 [1986]). Here, discourses inform and regulate the embodied aspects of *comiendo bien*, as well as its representation. Furthermore, *comiendo bien* is not merely a configuration of discourses, it is also a normative discursive act that regulates and reinforces parents' authority, enactments of gender, motherhood, nationality, and health both in Latin America and San Francisco, albeit with local variations. The discourses and embodied

practices presented here shape *comiendo bien* and demonstrate how Latinos collectively create *Latinidad*.

Comida casera and comida callejera—These families privileged the preparation and consumption of homemade meals, which originated in their respective communities in Latin America. *Comida casera* (homemade food) and *comida callejera* (street food) are *in vivo* codes that represent a discourse about the relationship between food prepared inside and outside of the home. *Comida callejera* (street) could be a meal at a restaurant, a pastry from a bakery, or a snack from a street vendor—any food prepared outside of the home. For example, if a family ordered a rotisserie chicken with side dishes to eat at home it was far from *comiendo bien* simply because it was not prepared at home.

Comida callejera was considered unhealthy and did not even represent “eating.” For example, Susana’s 18-year-old son moved in with his girlfriend when we had our second interview. I asked Susana if his girlfriend cooked, and Susana said, “No. What is she going to cook? She does not cook. No. They only eat in the street and if you saw him, he’s so skinny!” Susana implied that her son’s new diet and his girlfriend’s lack of cooking caused his weight loss. The criterion to eat *comida casera* in order to accomplish *comiendo bien* also reinforces the expectation for women to feed the family.

Living in an immigrant community with other Latin Americans and having markets selling Latin American products facilitated the representation and intersubjective performance of motherhood. The (re)interpretation and (re)presentation of *comiendo bien* are also influenced by the presence and judgment of other Latinas/os, and one’s perceptions of their judgments. For example, Denise believed that Latina mothers in San Francisco were not upholding customs by cooking less for their family. Below, Denise is indirectly referring to her tenant, a Peruvian single mother:

Well, it depends because immigrants that come here and lose their customs from their country, now they do not want cook; they buy food that is already cooked ... I have seen mothers who do not cook and they buy their children McDonald’s, for the kids, and that is the meal.

Social engagement in immigrant communities thrusts new Latina immigrant mothers to perform motherhood and its related duties in the United States. They are at risk of being judged by other Latinas for not preparing *comida casera* for their family.

To curb their family’s desires to eat out and manage their budgets, parents often described *comida callejera* as unhygienic or detrimental to health. Eating homemade meals prepared with natural ingredients promoted children’s appreciation for diverse flavors and food that parents believed were good for their health. Eating *comida callejera* also devalued both a woman’s efforts to feed and other family members’ effort to provide for the family. Susana advised against the overconsumption of street food because it pushed the children away from home, “One gets their children so used to eating on the street that afterwards you make them food in the house and they do not want it.” The discourse favoring *comida casera* was not unique to a specific age, time of migration, or a subgroup of Latinos. This discourse shaped

these Latinos' common eating practices, but simultaneously reinforced the representation of women's work and family members' commitment to the family.

Although parents in this study shunned street food, they still ate at restaurants or enjoyed a street cart delight. Even those with the most stringent dietary practices allowed themselves and their family opportunities to eat for pleasure.

ADM: So, do you think that people have to change their diets completely?

Lorena: It is not so much that I have changed my diet completely, nor do I want to change the diet of others, but there is a need for balance, like I mentioned ... Me during the weekends, I allow myself everything. I think that there is a need for balance—to have a moderation.

Imaginary naturalness—Latina/o immigrants in this study not only consumed food prepared at home, but also food that was free of any additives, nutrient enrichments, preserved in cans, packages, or frozen. Foods that were sold in these conditions were considered “processed” and “unnatural.” For this reason, participants believed that they ate better in Latin America because the food was “natural,” and “tasted” better. In particular, they believed that the dairy, meat, eggs, and produce from their country were neither produced with chemical enhancers or hormones, nor chemically preserved.

Participants from rural communities described produce in Latin America as unaltered and locally grown. They perceived food as natural since they could gather fresh fruit, vegetables, or herbs from their garden. As Lorena said, if someone wanted to eat fruit in Michoacán, all they had to do was “... stretch out their hand.” Local markets in Latin America were described as selling produce with dirt, not adorned in cellophane. Selena recalls the meat from her pueblo in Tabasco, México being fresher than in San Francisco:

No, it [meat] is fresh because over there one goes to the market and they are already cutting the cow in quarters and they are selling it there, no? ... It is fresh.

They kill it in the night and the next day they are selling [it] ... And, my father, for example, he would kill pigs, and at dawn he is killing it, and he is selling it at six, seven in the morning. It is what people will be eating at midday.

This representation of Latin American food as natural and pure is the discourse of *imaginary naturalness*. “Imaginary” was *not* chosen to undermine the informants' memories of food produced in Latin America. Rural Latin Americans' representations of natural food are constructed from memories of dirt on produce and animal butchery, which is closer to the reality of farm life than a stroll down the supermarket aisle. However, with global advances in food production and nutrition (Fischer and Benson 2006; Leatherman and Goodman 2005), food systems in Latin America were more modern than the participants realized.

This group of Latino immigrants in San Francisco has constructed the discourse of *imaginary naturalness* to justify their claims that they ate better in Latin America and to elevate food in Latin America. Although there was often food insecurity and monotony in their diets, at least the food in Latin America was free of artificial alteration. Moreover,

participants construct positive discourses about food in Latin America to deal with their inability to enjoy food from their sender communities. Meat, eggs, dairy, and produce in San Francisco just did not taste “right” to Latino immigrants. Their shared experiences of “tasting difference” can provide an example Latina/o immigrants from different countries constructing a reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967) about Latin American food and a sense of “belongingness” in San Francisco. As Bhabha (1994:6) asserts, constructing a new meaning of diaspora pushes migrants from solely identifying vis-à-vis their nation, but also through an ethnicity. U.S. migration can produce similar *turning points* (Strauss 1993) among this diverse group of immigrants, which facilitates the formation of a localized *Latinidad* through *comiendo bien*. Tasting similar foods distinctly creates a sensory community (Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk 2012). By generalizing all U.S. foods as processed they reinforce the discourse of *imaginary naturalness*, which endorses Latin American food and promotes a critical perspective on U.S. food.

Although Latino immigrants agree on the distinct taste and poor quality of food in the United States, one discourse that shapes this group’s performance of *Latinidad* is actually about difference. María found the flavor of cumin to be so different from the one she consumed in Honduras, that her family sends her cumin. She felt that her family could not enjoy their meals without this distinct Honduran cumin.

María: Here, they [Latinos] call it cumin, us, we call it “especia” in Honduras, but here they call it cumin. It is not the same, it tastes different, the cumin from here in comparison from over there. The annatto seed, too ... now, these things are more Mexican ... So, it is better that I entrust someone to bring it to me from over there.

Not only is the flavor of the cumin different for María, but Hondurans also call it by another name. She is attributing the cumin’s distinct flavor to the fact that the ingredient was imported from Mexico. This is one way that Latinos distinguish each other—through the foods that they consider unique to their region or country. Denise told me that the national dish of Nicaragua is *gallo pinto*. However, *gallo pinto*’s one pot black beans and rice is similar to Cuban *congrí*, Honduran *casamiento*, among others. Distinguishing national dishes, foods, and spices by different names to represent different nationalities is an example of Hall’s (1997:53) “doubleness of similarity and difference” where people’s national history and culture differ and are at the same time similar depending on the point of reference for the observer.

In the case of *same difference*, the taste and the origin of the ingredient matter in distinguishing Latinos culturally and geographically. The very act of distinguishing foods and re-signifying them this way is a way to acknowledge Latino immigrants’ particularities. How *they* differentiate each other by food and flavor is similar among these immigrants. Although Latinos create opportunities for collective identity, they also produce instances of difference in order to transgress negative effects of exclusion and the ethnic homogenization by non-Latinos.

Despite differences, Latino immigrants in San Francisco collectively construct *Latinidad*, particularly, if we consider families where the parents were from two Latin American

countries. Among five participating families, the wife imparted and their partner engaged *comiendo bien* without finding the practice foreign. For example, Veronica from El Salvador, prepares foods she grew up with: a meat dish, rice, beans, and salad. Although her husband, a Mexican, did not grow up eating much rice or salad Veronica's meals share the structure of the *platotóte* he is familiar with. He is supportive of Veronica's way of imparting *comiendo bien* to their daughters by not discouraging them from eating Veronica's meals. Veronica is assuming a responsibility her husband saw women in his family do. Scenarios at the dinner table between the wife, husband/partner and children were similar across families with parents coming from different Latin American countries.

However, when I asked participants with partners from the same country whether they thought all Latinos practiced *comiendo bien* similarly, some responded as Rosa did: "No, I don't think they do ... because we all have our own way of being." These cooks were often taking into consideration others' cooking techniques and beliefs about which foods were nutritious. Yet, these diverse families are consciously using *comiendo bien* to reduce the use of medical services, and discursively to reproduce gender, parenthood, family authority, eating, and food practices that they believe distinguish them from others in San Francisco.

The embodiment of *comiendo bien*—The embodied accomplishment of *comiendo bien* is important to demonstrate how *Latinidad* is recreated through normative embodied acts such as *feeling full*. *Feeling full* is not limited to the feeling in one's stomach, but more importantly, is visual. Visualizing the meal and assessing how much is consumed from the *platotóte* are the first acts that Latinos do at the table. *Comiendo bien* is verified by the amount of food consumed from someone's plate. The parents, particularly family cooks, used their eyes to assess everyone's plate. The parents' *visual gauging* of food on their children's and guests' plates superseded the individual's interpretation of fullness. If one did not consume most or all of the food served to them, then they did not demonstrate to the cook that they were full.

Although Latino immigrant fathers are less responsible for visual gauging others' plates, they were instrumental in supporting their wife's petitions to eat, or gathering support from others to resist the introduction of new foods. For example, Rosa (Married, mother of two) tried to create a "healthier" meal with a salad. Her husband openly asked their son, who was not eating the food on his plate, "Since when have we converted to vegetarians?" When they vacated the table, Rosa's husband offered to take their son out for a "real meal." In his mind, they were not satiated because they did not have tortillas or meat accompanying their salad. During our second interview, Rosa told me that she often prepared one meal for her husband and son, and another (with more vegetables) for her and her daughter. Rosa felt this obligation to ensure that her entire family reached the point where they felt full.

Family members compliance to acts, such as eating everything on their *platotóte*, demonstrates how *comiendo bien* is a normative act. *Duty to the family* is a discourse where family members' actions are influenced by a commitment to the family's wellbeing. "Duty to the family" guarantees the financial and domestic contributions from every member towards the material and social survival of the family. Similar to *familismo* (Sabogal et al. 1987), "duty to the family" marks events when the participants fulfill an unwritten obligation

on behalf of their family. Unlike *familismo*, which implies selflessness, the parents' manifestations of authority were also met with opposition, as in Rosa's example. "Duty to family" also informed adults' and their children's sense of responsibility to eat everything to avoid becoming ill, which could cause these working-class, immigrant parents to miss work, incur medical bills and other inconveniences.

The pressure to "feel full" in the presence of others was not limited to parent-child interactions, but also among adults. Even when adults physically felt satiated, they often ate more if those eating with them communicated that they had not eaten enough. For example, Malena was told by her Guatemalan date that she was not eating enough because she only ordered two tacos. During my observations of these families in community settings, they had eaten more than they wanted when others told them that they were "trying to be delicate." The word "trying" implies that meager eaters are attempting to be refined. These are examples of presentation of self, and more specifically "impression management" (Goffman 1959:19) because eating everything presents to the community that one is performing the role of a working-class, Latino immigrant. The representation of "feeling full" and "visual gauging" are important both in the reproduction of *comiendo bien* and the performance of *Latinidad* in San Francisco.

Comiendo bien is informed by discourses constructed by Latino immigrants in their sender countries (*comida callejera* vs. *comida casera*, duty to the family) and in San Francisco (*replicating mamá*, tasting difference, imaginary naturalness, and same difference). The collective activity involved in reproducing *comiendo bien* is both shaped by previous and current structural positions, normative discourses, and is constitutive of multiple identity positions. Latina immigrant mothers typically reproduce and lead the performance of *comiendo bien*. Although less visible, cohabitants, male partners and children are also contributing to the reproduction of *comiendo bien* by providing the money, planning the menu, or fulfilling their duty to the family by eating everything served on their *platotóte*—conforming to and reproducing *comiendo bien*. The actions may be reified, but certainly not immutable. The conceptual elements that construct *comiendo bien*—structural context, discourses, and embodiment—are not mutually exclusive but relational.

COMIENDO BIEN AS A PERFORMANCE OF *LATINIDAD*

The goal of this study was to provide a processual description of *comiendo bien* (eating well) among diverse Latino immigrant families in San Francisco in order to demonstrate how interactionist approaches to performance can be fruitful in examining the construction, negotiation, and representation of *Latinidad*. I commenced this paper introducing a deep debate in Latina/o Studies about the utility of Latina/o panethnic labels. Unlike some, I do not believe that the panethnic "Latina/o" label is merely a construct imposed onto a collective by U.S. private and public institutions. Although "Hispanic" and "Latino" have origins in colonization and are perpetuated by transnational institutions' attempts to distinguish this diverse group as the Other, Latina/o immigrants and their children transform these labels to enact *Latinidad* in their everyday activities in ethnic and immigrant enclaves—beyond political organizing and underground artistic expression.

These Latino immigrants shared many experiences that unite them, such as their migration trajectories, experiences of marginalization, and material conditions in San Francisco. But these experiences are not a set of attributes that define all Latinos. For example, the perspectives of elite Latin Americans may not reflect these experiences. Rather, this representation of *Latinidad* through *comiendo bien* reflects the actions of primarily working-class, undocumented immigrants in San Francisco. Their representation of *Latinidad* is amplified as a result of often living, working and obtaining community-based social services together in that city. They collectively create those actions that constitute *Latinidad* through practices like *comiendo bien*.

Symbolic interactionists emphasize the importance of reflexivity, which is diluted in the poststructuralist subject often utilized to examine Latina/o identity formation. Reflexivity is very important if distinct Latin Americans re-interpret and perform *Latinidad*. The act of *comiendo bien* is further implicated by symbolic and cultural representations of the self; whether these positions come from social structures such as government agencies, class hierarchies or situational encounters (Clarke 2005; Strauss 1993; Thomas W.I and Thomas D. 1928), they still involve a reflexive process where Latinos inscribe symbolic meanings onto the body with food, or onto the food itself. Moreover, this examination of *comiendo bien* represents sociology's interest to "garner a greater sense of how symbolic interaction is part and parcel of broader sociological thinking of race" (Buford-May 2007:295). Although Strauss (1993) did not write his theory of action specifically to examine race and ethnicity, his discussion of reflexivity and his expansion of Goffman's (1959) performance and presentation are of immense utility in examining racial formation and panethnic consciousness. Strauss emphasizes that we must examine actions, performances and representations through process and structural conditions. Representations like Latina/o can be bestowed upon others, but actors transform this status and contest its symbolic meanings through performance and by establishing the authorized agents. Sociologists need to be reminded that symbolic interaction can be used to analyze ethnic identity creation and transformation in new contexts (such as eating) and beyond Latinas/os to multiple diasporas.

As interactionist performance demonstrates, *comiendo bien* moves beyond the food, or the act of eating, to a cultural construct that is reproducing other structural positions. This health practice facilitates the enactments of gender, parenthood, care-giver, nationality, family, and other identity positions. *Comiendo bien* is not solely a lay health practice, but rather a performance, since family members must engage in one or more activities to reproduce *comiendo bien* in San Francisco. Finally, I do not negate the multiple racial, ethnic, class, linguistic and political heterogeneities among Latino immigrants and U.S. Latinos living in the United States or abroad. However, further research should examine when these differences matter in Latinos' life chances and the actions they take to fuse or transform multiple shared or contested identity positions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* and CARECEN of San Francisco for facilitating recruitment and the families who so graciously participated in this study. I am infinitely grateful for Virginia Olesen's helpful and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Thank you for all of your support! This research was for my doctoral dissertation, which could not have been completed without the support of my dissertation committee,

Adele E. Clarke, Howard Pinderhughes, and Jeffrey Pilcher. This research was funded by the Anselm L. Strauss Dissertation Award and the National Institutes of General Medical Sciences, Initiative for Maximizing Student Diversity (R25 GM56847 PI: Patricia Calarco, Ph.D.).

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TABLE 1.

Key Informant and Family Demographics

Key Informant Pseudonym	Year of Migration	Age at Migration	Age at Study	Sender Community	Rural/Urban	Migrated w/ Children	Marital Status	Family Size
Malena	1988	18	38	Jalisco, México Ex-Husband: El Salvador	Rural	N	Divorced	4 (3 children)
Vick	1993	21	36	Durango, México Ex-Husband: El Salvador	Rural	N	Divorced	4 (sister, nephew, daughter)
Selena	1993	19	34	Tabasco, México	Rural	N	Married	4 (2 children)
Veronica	1995	15	28	Sonsonate, El Salvador Husband: Mexico City, DF	Urban	N	Married	4 (2 children)
Susana	1996	26	38	México, DF	Urban	Y	Married	5 (3 children)
Rosa	1996	23	35	México, DF	Urban	Y	Married	4 (2 children)
Mari Cruz	1998	22	32	Tinga María, Perú	Rural	N	Married	4 (2 children)
Lorena	1999	18	27	Michoacán, México Ex-Husband: El Salvador	Rural	N	Divorced	3 (2 children)
Ashley	2001	43	50	Guatemala, DF Husband: Perú	Urban	N	Divorced	4 (children lived abroad) 3 cohabitants
Claudia	2002	27	32	Morelos, México	Urban	Y	Divorced	3 (2 children)
Mari	2005	52	58	México, DF (Born in Lima, Peru) Husband: México, DF	Urban	Y	Separated	2(1 child)
Denise	2005	35	38	Managua, Nicaragua	Urban	Y	Married	5 (3 children)
Margarita	2006	32	35	San Salvador, El Salvador	Urban	Y	Married	5 (3 children)
María	2007	27	29	Tegucigalpa, Honduras	Urban	N	Partnered	3(1 child)
Mariela	2008	28	28	Lima, Perú	Urban	Y	Divorced	2 (1 child)