

Recognizing and Representing Mexico at EPCOT Center's Mexico Pavilion

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Abstract: In this article, I explore the creation of the Mexico pavilion that opened in 1982 at Walt Disney World's EPCOT Center theme park in Orlando, Florida. I show how designers created a representation of Mexico intended to be recognizably authentic to EPCOT Center visitors by drawing on established touristic images of Mexico in the United States. I then discuss Disney's decision to hire Mexican American artist Eddie Martinez to oversee the design of the pavilion's main attraction, a boat ride through Mexican history and culture. Specifically, I examine Martinez's involvement in the Goetz Art Studio and Gallery in East Los Angeles to explain how Mexican Americans gained cultural authority as interpreters of Mexico in the United States. Finally, I show how the pavilion reflected ways in which Mexican Americans read and reconstructed established visions of Mexico in the United States, particularly in relation to pre-Columbian cultures.

Every year over eleven million people visit the Epcot theme park at Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida, making it the United States' third and the world's sixth most-visited theme park in 2014 (TEA/AECOM 2015, 12). Conceived of as a "permanent world's fair," the park opened as EPCOT Center in 1982. It is divided into one section called Future World featuring technology-themed pavilions, and another called World Showcase with pavilions representing eleven different countries. Roughly six million of Epcot's visitors venture into World Showcase's Mexico pavilion, which takes the shape of a pre-Columbian temple and features Mexico-themed dining and retail, and a boat ride through Mexican history and culture.¹ Opening with EPCOT Center in 1982, the Mexico pavilion has provided tens of millions of people with a simulated trip south of the border and continues to serve as a particularly elaborate and high-profile representation of Mexico in the United States.

In this article, I examine the ways in which the creation of the Mexico pavilion reflected how images of Mexico had been shaped in the United States in the decades prior to its opening. I explore how Mexico's postrevolutionary nation-building project was tightly interwoven with the country's promotion as a tourist destination in the United States. This dynamic produced a series of images of Mexico likely familiar to EPCOT Center visitors that were used by designers to produce a recognizably "Mexican" experience. Equally important to understand-

1. Notimex, "Brillará Quintana Roo en el Epcot Center," *Terra*, April 4, 2007, <http://www.terra.com.mx/articulo.aspx?articuloId=109011>.

ing how Mexico was represented at EPCOT Center is the context in which it was designed in Southern California during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Disney sought out Mexican American² creative talent from East Los Angeles (East LA) involved in local artistic and cultural movements to improve the authenticity of Disney's representation of Mexico. I therefore also examine how the relatively recent rise of a politically assertive Mexican American cultural identity in Southern California shaped the pavilion's design.

Uncovering the history of the Mexico pavilion's creation was methodologically challenging for two main reasons. First, the pavilion was created by a private company—the Walt Disney Company (referred to in this article as Disney)—which was unwilling to make company records of the pavilion's creation available or otherwise cooperate with this research. Such reluctance on the part of private companies to open their internal archives to independent researchers points to a significant and growing challenge for scholars aiming to explore the role of private institutions in the production of public culture. A second factor was the limited availability for consultation of those involved in the pavilion's creation, due to the deaths of some in the subsequent decades, or because they felt prevented from talking due to their continued professional relationship with Disney, or for other personal reasons.

I was, however, able to directly communicate with two artists about their roles in the pavilion's creation: Eddie Martinez, the designer of the pavilion's principle ride-through attraction, and Tom Gilleon, who worked as an illustrator on the World Showcase project including the Mexico pavilion. There were also limitations imposed on this communication by a lack of availability for in-person or telephone interviews, so interviews were necessarily conducted through e-mail correspondence and typed questionnaires. However, both Martinez and Gilleon were generous in answering follow-up questions through e-mail.

Some accounts and interviews from those who worked on the pavilion already existed, and I have drawn upon them here. Most important, Martinez has written extensively about his work, making this available through his personal website. Artist Ray Aragon also talked about his work on the pavilion's ride in an interview shortly before his death in 2009. I have further used the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Oral History Series for information regarding the Mexican American cultural scene of East LA during the 1970s, in particular the extensive interview with Goetz Art Studio and Gallery cofounder Johnny González. Published documents released prior to and roughly concurrent within EPCOT Center's opening in October 1982 serve as further sources about the development and reception of the theme park and the Mexico pavilion specifically. These included newspaper reports and publications intended by Disney for the general public or company employees, such as annual reports, internal newsletters, and employee handbooks. Finally, I contextualized this research through a review of the secondary historical literature on tourism and nationalism in Mexico and the

2. In this article, I use "Mexican American" as a broad term to refer to people who identified as having Mexican ancestry and who were living and working in the United States. I do, however, also use the term "Chicano" when referencing sources in which this term is used.

literature dealing with Mexican American political and cultural activism in the United States.

Despite the challenges involved, I believe that this historical analysis of the Mexico pavilion at EPCOT Center provides a new and fruitful perspective on the transnational and multilayered dynamic of cultural relations between Mexico and the United States during the twentieth century. In particular, the case study of the Mexico pavilion sheds new light on both the development of US-Mexico tourism and Mexican American cultural politics. This exploration of those themes begins by examining the Mexico pavilion within the context of the EPCOT Center theme park and then analyzing how touristic images of Mexico were reflected in its design. In the second part of this article, I will examine how the creation of the Mexico pavilion was influenced by new ways in which Mexican Americans were reading and appropriating established images of Mexico in the United States as the pavilion was designed between 1976 and 1982.

AUTHENTICALLY SIMULATING MEXICO

The World Showcase project was first announced in 1975, with Mexico consistently featured in publically released plans of the project. Indeed, Disney ultimately committed to building a Mexico pavilion whether or not it could attract sponsors to subsidize its construction and operation, as was the funding model with most of the other pavilions (EPCOT Center 1982, 1).³ Senior vice president of marketing at Walt Disney World, Jack Lindquist (2010, 126), recalled that Disney did, however, make significant but ultimately unsuccessful efforts to secure the direct participation of the Mexican government in the pavilion. These efforts included negotiations with Mexico's Secretary of Tourism and several trips to Mexico by company officials, including one on which they presented plans for the pavilion to President Luis Echeverría and his family in the Mexican presidential residence of Los Pinos.⁴

These efforts were made, according to Lindquist (2010, 126), not just for financial reasons, but also so that the pavilion would be considered "authentic" rather than just "Disney's interpretation of Mexico." Artist Tom Gilleon, who worked on early concept art for the pavilion, remembered that, due to the close relationship between Mexico and the United States, particular care was taken in deciding how Mexico would be represented at EPCOT Center.⁵ Disney invited Mexican exchange students and the Mexican ambassador to the United States to comment

3. The proposal for a Mexico pavilion was first publically revealed when in 1975 Disney announced World Showcase as a stand-alone venue at Walt Disney World featuring a series of indoor national pavilions (Kurti 1996, 84–86). Original plans called for national governments to sign a minimum ten-year lease and cover the costs of designing, developing, constructing, and housing the employees sent to staff each pavilion (Walt Disney Productions 1975, 5–7). Tom Gilleon, correspondence with author, May 13, 2013, discussed the role of sponsors.

4. Jack Lindquist (2010, 124–128) named the secretary of tourism with whom he negotiated as Guillermo Rossell de la Lama. As the initial trip by Disney's negotiators to Mexico was in January 1976 and Rossell de la Lama did not occupy that position until December 1, 1976, it is likely that initial meetings were held with his predecessor Julio Hirschfeld Almada.

5. Tom Gilleon, correspondence with author, May 13, 2013.

on the pavilion's early designs; the students were critical of these plans and suggested that the designers needed a more direct experience of Mexico (EPCOT Center 1981, 1; Imagineers 2010, 77).⁶ From the earliest stages of designing World Showcase, Disney therefore appears to have considered Mexico's relationship with the United States sufficiently important to merit its inclusion beyond financial considerations. The company also appears to have been particularly concerned that Mexico be represented in a way that could be considered authentic.

Disney Imagineer X. Atencio, who oversaw the entire pavilion's design, reacted to the exchange students' comments suggesting inauthenticity by hiring artist Eddie Martinez in 1976 to develop the early concepts for a ride-through attraction showcasing Mexican history and culture. This ride would serve as the pavilion's main attraction. Following the project's approval in 1979, Martinez was then hired as production designer, overseeing a dedicated team of designers, illustrators, draftsmen, model makers, sculptors, and special effects designers.⁷ Having been born in Los Angeles to Mexican parents, Martinez had worked extensively at the Mexican American Goetz Art Studios and Gallery, a pioneering Mexican American arts organization in East LA, as well as having worked previously on murals at Disneyland and Walt Disney World.⁸

Working on the pavilion alongside Martinez was film layout artist Ray Aragon, a friend of Martinez's who was hired to work on various aspects of the ride-through attraction, including costume and set design (Ghez 2011, 292–293).⁹ Aragon had been born to a Mexican father in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, and had previously been involved with Goetz and with projects at Walt Disney Studios. Further providing a link between the pavilion's development and Mexican American cultural movements was the participation of Mexican-born and Los Angeles-based *danzante* Florencio Yescas and his Esplendor Azteca group. Yescas and his group practiced a form of pre-Columbian dance and ritual called *danza azteca* and were hired by Martinez to choreograph and perform in filmed segments of the ride.¹⁰

Such attention to authenticity beyond the superficial appearance of the Mexican pavilion may initially seem unusual. Social scientists in the late twentieth century were broadly dismissive of tourism as inherently inauthentic, with Disney theme parks standing out as one of the most emblematic examples of the simulation and inauthenticity that characterized not just modern tourism but, increasingly, daily life in the United States (Baudrillard 2010, 12–14; Eco 1986, 43–48; Fjellman 1992; MacCannell 1992; Ritzer and Liska 1997). However, I argue here against simply dismissing as inherently “inauthentic” particular modes of representing history and culture due to their performative aspect or the use of techniques such as re-creation or pastiche. Such an approach misses the complex way in which authenticity is understood and performed within social, cultural, and economic systems.

6. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

7. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

8. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

9. “World Showcase Comes to Life in L.A. Barrio,” *EPCOT Center Today* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 2.

10. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

It also risks applying essentialist notions of the authentic when, in fact, the criteria against which authenticity is judged in different contexts is largely subjective in nature.

Anthropologist Quetzil Castañeda (1996, 104–5) has noted that even the reconstruction of archeological sites such as the Mayan ruins of Chichén Itzá involves archeologists making a series of conscious decisions guided by the scientific criteria of their discipline. The end result is therefore not the restoration of an authentic structure but one remade based upon “specific criteria and logics of authenticity.” Much the same can be said about the design of the World Showcase pavilions and theme park attractions in general for which the idea of “theme” entails evoking a certain sense of authenticity for the entertainment value of their users. I therefore argue that the most fruitful form of analysis for understanding the image of Mexico presented at EPCOT Center is not to debate its authenticity but rather to explore the criteria of authenticity that guided its creators in choosing how to represent Mexico.

The World Showcase national pavilions created by Disney’s designers—called “Imagineers” to evoke a blending of imagination and engineering—were designed to create a sensation of authenticity through an idealized pastiche of vernacular architectural styles, well-known landmarks, and “national” costumes worn by employees that visitors would recognize as representative of each country. Each pavilion also featured retail stores selling iconic national brands, such as a shop selling Hummel figurines in Germany and one selling Twinings Tea in the United Kingdom. Serving guests in these stores were college-aged nationals of each country who were brought to EPCOT Center work for up to a year in their national pavilion.¹¹

It was the contemporary experience of tourism that provided the overriding logic of authenticity which guided Disney’s Imagineers in their design approach to EPCOT Center’s World Showcase. Disney’s promotional literature described World Showcase as a tribute to tourism, giving visitors a taste of the experience of traveling to different countries, seeing recognizable vernacular architecture, and sampling exotic products (Beard 1982, 134–135). In essence, designers undertook the process of mapping the “topography of identities, belongings, memories, places, practices, and discourses” that Castañeda (1996, 260) argues tourists normally undertake as they travel.

Such an approach often involved a deliberate blurring of time and space so that each pavilion resonated with images already established in the minds of visitors. A Disney-authorized publication in 1982 (Beard, 134–135) described how this worked in practice, orientating visitors to the France pavilion by rhetorically asking “are you in Paris? Yes. Are you in the rest of France, known collectively as the provinces? Yes again. Epcot Center has given you a little of both.” Illustrator Tom Gilleon, who worked on World Showcase, remembers that this approach at times provoked resistance from sponsors who wanted a more accurate representation of their country. According to Gilleon, “It was very difficult to convey that guests

11. “Close Encounters with EPCOT,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1982.

coming to the park want to see preconceived ideas of the world as opposed to factual realities."¹²

The long-term success of EPCOT and the fact that the World Showcase pavilions have remained largely unchanged in their general design since the theme park's opening indicates that the Imagineers were largely successful in creating national pavilions that passed the tourist's test of recognizable authenticity. A travel reporter from a Canadian newspaper in 1982 indeed described the pavilions as "so very realistic that they almost have you convinced you have crossed oceans to get here."¹³ In terms of the touristic experience of sampling exotic products, the most commented-on feature in newspaper reports on World Showcase following EPCOT Center's opening were restaurants in each pavilion featuring distinctive examples of each country's national cuisine. Reporters noted that visitors would in fact rush straight to a central reservation center at park opening to secure highly sought-after lunch and dinner reservations before they quickly sold out for the day.¹⁴

The Mexico pavilion's San Angel Inn was among those restaurants for which EPCOT Center visitors would compete for reservations. The pavilion as a whole was also designed in a way that corresponded to this same touristic logic of authenticity. Situated beside the walkway that connected all of the World Showcase pavilions around a large lagoon, the bulk of the Mexico pavilion was housed inside a structure that evoked a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican structure. A booklet intended for the pavilion's employees (EPCOT Center 1982, 1) described this structure's façade as displaying "a composite of pre-Columbian architecture leaning more toward the style of the Aztec civilization." Visitors entered the pavilion through the base of a small pyramid, passed through an interior museum of pre-Columbian artifacts and into the "Plaza de los Amigos." This section of the pavilion was an indoor re-creation of a Spanish colonial town plaza at night modeled on the historical silver mining town and tourist destination of Taxco in the state of Guerrero. Scattered around the plaza were stalls selling Mexican handicrafts and branded products such as José Cuervo tequila (Beard 1982, 230; EPCOT Center 1982, 5).

At the end of the plaza was the entrance to the pavilion's main attraction, the El Rio del Tiempo boat ride. Next to the ride was an outpost of Mexico City's historic San Angel Inn restaurant. The restaurant was designed as a terrace with tables overlooking an indoor river on the other side of which was a Mayan pyramid framed by a diorama of smoldering volcanoes and tropical jungles (Salmone 1997). Securing reservations at EPCOT Center's San Angel Inn thus allowed visitors to condense an entire vacation in Mexico into one meal of *mole poblano* at an

12. Tom Gilleon, correspondence with author, May 13, 2013.

13. "Epcot: Worlds of Men and Minds," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, December 4, 1982.

14. "Enter a Future World with a Familiar Feel," *Boston Globe*, October 24, 1982; "How's Life at EPCOT? Not So Hot," *Boston Globe*, March 31, 1983; "EPCOT: Walt Disney World Adds Nine New Nations and a City of the Future," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 26, 1982; "Close Encounters with EPCOT," *New York Times*, November 14, 1982; "'Not Just Food, but World Class Cuisine,'" *Toronto Globe and Mail*, December 4, 1982.

historic Mexico City hacienda under a starry sky in the mountain town of Taxco while looking out across the water at a Mayan pyramid on the Yucatán Peninsula. This was an image of a vacation in Mexico that had been promoted to potential tourists in countless publications aimed at a US audience during the four decades prior to the pavilion's opening.

MEXICO AS AN AUTHENTIC TOURIST DESTINATION

Beginning in the decade following the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), the Mexican state laid down the bases of a new, hegemonic “revolutionary” nationalism. This nationalism was defined as popular and inclusive, with state cultural institutions selectively incorporating regional cultural practices into a national vernacular popular culture. The new national culture was further promoted through radio, film, and, beginning in the 1950s, television (Saragoza 2001, 95). As well as a pantheon of national heroes and a well-defined historical narrative that connected Mexico's nineteenth-century War of Independence and liberal reform period to the Mexican Revolution, a central feature of Mexico's postrevolutionary nationalism was the mythology of *mestizaje*, or cultural and racial mixing between indigenous and European populations. *Mestizaje* was conceived of as providing the ethnic basis of modern Mexico, and this was complemented with an *indigenismo* that signified a generally positive evaluation of the cultural and scientific achievements of Mexico's pre-Columbian civilizations as the primordial, but now superseded, roots of the Mexican nation (Lomnitz 2000; López 2010, 293; Sánchez 1999, 41).

In postrevolutionary Mexico, a symbiotic relationship between nationalism and tourism was evident in the involvement of many of the same institutions in the state's nation-building and tourist development projects (Berger 2006, 59–63).¹⁵ As Néstor García Canclini (1993, 65) has argued, tourism is generally driven in a similar fashion to nationalism by a dialectic that involves the need to homogenize while at the same time preserving the exotic. This leads to a situation in which a cultural expression of an ethnicity, community, or regional group loses its particularity, becoming instead, for example, “typically” Mexican. Such a dynamic also occurs in international tourism, in which such homogenized national or regional identities are sold and consumed in a global market of destinations. This was indeed the image presented by EPCOT Center's World Showcase through its series of national pavilions that could be viewed together around the shores of a lagoon as recognizably distinct from one another but internally consistent and instantly recognizable in their national identities.

The dynamic by which the Mexican state's promotion of a homogenous national culture reinforced Mexico's development as a tourist destination is particularly strongly reflected in the Mexico pavilion's main attraction, the ride *El Rio del*

15. Saragoza (2001, 95) identifies the four main thematic concerns that emerged from these efforts as being *indigenismo*, monumentalism, concern for the folkloric, and intellectual debate over *mexicanidad*.

Tiempo (the River of Time).¹⁶ This was in fact the only ride in the original World Showcase, with all the other pavilions featuring combinations of shops, restaurants, live entertainment, and filmed attractions.¹⁷ Martínez's approach to designing El Rio del Tiempo was inspired by the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City's Tlatelolco neighborhood. Following the opening in 1964 of a vast complex of modernist public housing towers designed by Mexican architect Mario Pani, this plaza was promoted by Mexican tourism officials as representative of a hegemonic, progressive narrative of Mexico's national history and identity for its combination of pre-Columbian ruins, a colonial church, and modern architecture (Zolov 2001, 249). Martínez's El Rio del Tiempo similarly took visitors to the Mexico pavilion on a slow journey by boat through Mexico's "three cultures": pre-Columbian, Spanish colonial, and modern.¹⁸

On El Rio del Tiempo, visitors began their journey drifting slowly past a pyramid framed by tropical jungles and volcanoes into a tunnel decorated with illuminated frescos from the Mayan archeological site of Bonampak. As they entered the tunnel, a narrator informed visitors that "centuries ago, a great civilization flourished in my Mexico. This advanced culture produced remarkable scientists, mathematicians, and builders of magnificent temples" (EPCOT Center 1982, 5). Rear projection screens integrated into sets representing pre-Columbian buildings showed costumed dancers acting out scenes displaying Aztec and Mayan culture and knowledge. These were the Esplendor Azteca dancers led by Florencio Yescas.

Entering into the second section of El Rio del Tiempo, the narrator continued that Mexico's ancient culture lived on in the music and customs of its people. Visitors then drifted through a scene displaying many of the more theatrical elements of Mexican culture selected for preservation and promotion within Mexico by postrevolutionary state institutions such as National Institute of Anthropology and History (Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia) (Saragoza 2001, 98–99). Doll-like characters costumed and choreographed by Ray Aragon (Ghez 2011, 292–293) were shown, for example, dressed in a *charro* suit and sombrero, or battering a piñata. Another played a marimba, an instrument from Mexico's tropical south, alongside skeleton musicians of the Día de los Muertos amid a scene that took place in a Spanish colonial village set resembling an old mining town in the mountains of central Mexico.

This folkloric scene served as a transition for visitors between ancient and modern Mexico, which Martínez chose to represent through images of Mexican beach resorts.¹⁹ Visitors next drifted through sets representing the tropical beaches and high-rise hotels of Acapulco, while rear projection screens showed touristic im-

16. This ride closed in 2007 and was replaced with a modified version featuring characters from the motion picture *The Three Caballeros* (1944).

17. World Showcase featured nine national pavilions upon opening in 1982: Mexico, China, Germany, Italy, Japan, United States, France, United Kingdom, and Canada. In the years since, pavilions representing Morocco (1984) and Norway (1988) have also opened.

18. Eddie Martínez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

19. Eddie Martínez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

ages including cliff divers in Acapulco, bathers on the beaches of Tulum on the Yucatán Peninsula, and vendors hawking souvenirs. A cheery song written by veteran Disney theme park songwriter Buddy Baker played, welcoming guests to “friendly Mexico,” celebrating its fiestas and music, and naming some of Mexico’s main tourist destinations (EPCOT Center 1982, 6).²⁰

After experiencing Mexico’s ancient cultures and modern beach resorts, visitors concluded their ride on Mexico’s River of Time in the capital, Mexico City, passing by a giant black-lit mural of the monuments and skyscrapers of the Paseo de la Reforma while fiber-optic fireworks exploded overhead. A song played, suggesting to visitors they might meet again in a series of tourist centers such as Taxco, “tropical Cancún” or “charming Mazatlán” (EPCOT Center 1982, 6). The boats finally drifted back to the loading station past a Miguel Covarrubias-style map of Mexico showing images of children dressed in regional costumes set on the wall behind a selection of craft works. Exiting the ride, they found themselves back in the pavilion’s marketplace, where they could buy many of these crafts.

Such a progression through Mexico’s past and present supports cultural historian Eric Zolov’s (2001, 235) contention that promotion of Mexico’s image in the United States in the postrevolutionary period was built according to “complex cultural dialectic . . . in which referents of ‘cosmopolitan’ progress and ‘folkloric’ authenticity served as signposts for interpreting a new vision of Mexican nationhood.” As well as an “authentic” cultural experience, Mexican tourist officials from the late 1930s on sought to reassure visitors from north of the border that they would find comfortable hotels and modern infrastructure in Mexico (Berger 2006, 58–59; Saragoza 2001, 108). In addition to Mexican tourist authorities, US government agencies worked to reshape negative popular US notions of Mexico as a land of upheaval and moral degeneracy in order to strengthen economic, political, and defense ties between the two countries (Berger 2010, 110–111; Niblo 1999, 28–31; Zolov 2001, 238).²¹

The promotion of Mexico as a tourist destination and “good neighbor to the south” in the United States involved presenting Mexico in this sense as a “timeless” nation. Such an image further helped frame for visitors potentially unsettling images of underdevelopment, inequalities between urban and rural areas, and the continuing marginalization of indigenous people that may undermine Mexico’s claims to modernity as a captivating display of the coexistence of the premodern and modern in Mexico (Zolov 2001, 240–241). A popular 1962 guidebook of Mexico produced for the US tourists is emblematic of this conception in its description of Mexico as “a country busily constructing dams, pulling roads out of the jungle, building and peopling automobile plants, and in the process, bringing to light its majestic antiquities” (Zolov 2001, 247). EPCOT Center publicity material frequently mirrored this language, describing their re-creation of Mexico as, for example, containing “the relics of lost civilizations together with the bold new emblems of a country moving proudly into its future” (Walt Disney

20. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

21. As part of this effort, the Mexican Tourist Association coproduced films with the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA).

Productions 1982). More concretely, the folkloric scene on El Rio del Tiempo cleverly communicated such an image, blurring distinctions between past and present through representations of Spanish colonial architecture and “traditional” costumes while the narrator reminded visitors that the Mexican people’s ancient customs lived on in the present.

In this sense, the Mexico pavilion accorded with the general approach that guided the design of all the World Showcase pavilions in their presentation of images designed to pass the tourist’s test of recognizable authenticity, by drawing on touristic images of Mexico well-established in the United States by 1982. However, the Mexico pavilion was also unique among the national pavilions at World Showcase in that Disney specifically sought people with connections to the country being represented to work on the pavilion’s design. This was also done to address questions regarding the authenticity of how Mexico was represented at EPCOT Center, specifically those raised by the Mexican exchange students consulted about early designs. Rather than people from Mexico, however, the company hired an artist from Los Angeles, Eddie Martinez, to oversee the design of the pavilion’s main attraction and present his own “authentic” view of Mexico beginning in 1976. The reasoning behind this choice sheds light on the role that Mexican Americans were by then playing in appropriating and reshaping established images of Mexican identity within the United States.

FINDING MEXICO IN EAST LA

That Martinez in particular was approached in 1976 to add authenticity to the Mexico pavilion is suggestive of the growing cultural capital being won by Mexican American groups on the basis of their Mexican heritage during the 1970s. As sociologist Edward McCaughan (2012, 19) noted, there was not really one Mexican American political movement that developed during the 1960s and 1970s, but rather “a loose network of many movements, including students, farmworkers, labor organizers, cultural workers, community activists, prisoners’ rights advocates, antiwar activists, lesbian feminists.” However, in a broad sense, the art and cultural activism that accompanied political struggles associated with Mexican American and Chicano movements during the 1960s and 1970s can be understood according to Roberta Gardiner’s argument that “social movements do not mobilize support bases according to demographic characteristics; they create support bases by their practices of framing and defining identities” (McCaughan 2012, 4). In this case, framing and defining a new identity involved a process of reading and appropriating established images of Mexican history and culture as a tool of cultural and political empowerment.

Particularly important to understanding how the development of ideas about Mexican cultural heritage in the United States related to the Mexico pavilion is the history of the Goetz Art Studio and Gallery in East LA. Founded by brothers Joe and Johnny González and artist David Botello, Goetz was located on East First Street in East LA between 1969 and 1981 and during this time functioned as an art studio, gallery, dealership, clearinghouse for muralists, import business, fine arts restoration studio, and cultural center. Goetz provided a collaborative space

for local artists and developed strategies to assist, educate, and empower the local Mexican American community, playing a key role in establishing East LA's reputation as a center of Mexican American culture (Davalos 2011, 29–33).

Both Eddie Martinez and Ray Aragon made notable contributions to Goez as well as being central to the development of the Mexico pavilion during this period. Martinez was involved in Goez from an early stage, having known and studied alongside one of its founders, Joe González, at East Los Angeles College (González 2013, 143). Martinez also played an important role in one of Goez's most significant community initiatives, the East Los Angeles School of Mexican American Fine Arts (TELASOMAF). This school was a nonprofit division of Goez that provided studio art classes, workshops for youth, and apprenticeships, with Martinez serving as the school's one ongoing teacher alongside two guest teachers (González 2013, 189). Notable among Aragon's contributions to the gallery, meanwhile, was the selection of one of his paintings among three others from Goez artists to represent Chicano art in a World Peace Conference exhibition at Moscow's Pushkin Gallery during the early 1970s (González 2013, 218–219).

In the development of his art and sense of personal identity, Martinez was strongly influenced by his relationship with Goez and Joe González. Martinez (2009) describes a journey by car through Mexico in January 1975 with González, "visiting small villages, colonial pueblos, major cities, ancient archeological sites, and historical museums for the benefit of my cultural awareness," as a particularly important moment in this personal development. In the summer of that year, Martinez staged his first one-man exhibition at Goez called *Encanto en México* inspired by his experiences in Mexico (Martinez 2009).

This fact that people with Mexican ancestry living in East LA were now looking south to Mexico for awareness of their culture is suggestive of a dynamic that Stuart Hall (1993, 393) has described in relation to the formation of postcolonial cultural identities as the "act of imaginative rediscovery." While traditional models of cultural identity posited a process of discovery or recovery by people of a shared "authentic" history or ancestry, Hall suggested that what occurs is in reality "not the rediscovery but the *production* of identity. Not an identity grounded in archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past." This does not imply inauthenticity in the production of cultural identities; rather it acknowledges that "far from being fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power . . . identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 1993, 394; italics in original).

When developing ideas about what it meant to have a Mexican identity in the United States, artists working at Goez, like artists involved with the Chicano movement elsewhere, appropriated elements from postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism and art as a means of "asserting a distinct ethnic identity—and one with claims to a cultural heritage older and arguably richer than those of Anglo-America," as McCaughan (2012, 18) argues. In particular, Goez's artists drew upon the murals, monuments, and *indigenista* imagery of postrevolutionary Mexico (González 2013, 138; Davalos 2011, 31). This ran counter to how political activists in Mexico were viewing much of the same symbolism at the time. For

example, artist Arnulfo Aquino, who had been involved with the 1960s student protest movement in Mexico City and worked with Chicano muralists, graphic artists, and United Farm Worker (UFW) activists in California during 1970–1971, described being surprised that “Chicanos were recovering all of the [Mexican] national cultural links and symbols while in Mexico we were breaking with all of that” (McCaughan 2012, 18).

Cofounder of Goez Johnny González (2013, 135–136) also recalled that seeing appropriations of Mexican culture by people without Mexican heritage helped convince him that appropriating “Mexicanness” was a route to social inclusion and economic progress for Americans with Mexican ancestry. Specifically, González recalled seeing a non-Mexican wearing Mexican costume at the Santa Barbara festival, local “Mexican” furniture stores, and companies such as Frito and Taco Bell profiting from “Mexican” food while Mexican Americans focused on becoming Americanized in order to avoid discrimination. Martínez also suggested to a *Washington Post* reporter in 1975 that Mexican Americans should be taking control of the production of Mexicanness in US popular culture. He cited as missed opportunities that someone with Puerto Rican heritage was cast as a Mexican from East LA in the television series *Chico and the Man*, while another Puerto Rican was employed to impersonate a local Mexican American diving champion at the Marineland theme park in Palo Alto, California.²²

As artist and scholar Rubén Ortiz-Torres (2001, 33) has argued, “The art of Los Angeles is not divided into pure spaces such as high culture or popular culture, painting and conceptual art, minimalism and pop, the community and the avant garde, or Mexico and the United States. More than a cultural center, the city is the critical point at the edge of chaos where complexity is greatest.” This was certainly the reality of Goez’s perception of and contribution to Mexican American cultural life, with Goez artists moving between producing public art in East LA and doing commercial work for entertainment and other companies (González 2013, 186–187; Davalos 2011, 30). As well as taking inspiration from the murals of Mexican masters such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, artists working with Goez also drew on the immediate cultural and commercial context of Southern California for inspiration (Davalos 2011, 30). For example, Goez’s owners had originally, though ultimately unsuccessfully, proposed as part of a heritage tourism initiative the construction of a historical district in East LA modeled on Disneyland (González 2013, 138).

In the establishment of a strong Mexican American cultural identity for the community of East LA, however, Goez had the greatest impact through the commitment of its owners and artists to producing and promoting public art. Such artworks, they felt, could play a role in beautifying the neighborhood, promoting a sense of local self-esteem, and in politically and culturally educating East LA’s Mexican American community (Davalos 2011, 29). The promotion within East LA of history, culture, and art that reflected the Mexican ancestry of many community members was also conceived of by Goez’s founders as the basis for developing local tourism ventures. Such tourism, they hoped, could also strengthen

22. “The Other California,” *Washington Post*, May 7, 1975.

the economic and political independence of the local community (González 2013; Davalos 2011, 29).

Perhaps more than any other Goez initiative, it was this successful promotion of cultural tourism in East LA centering on mural production that helped establish a new cultural geography in Los Angeles that distinguished East LA on the basis of its cultural production.²³ In particular, the image that emerged was of artistic expressions of Mexican heritage springing forth from the *barrio*. This new cultural geography helps to explain why Disney looked toward East LA for cultural authenticity when developing EPCOT Center's Mexico pavilion.

Goez's artists had directly created approximately fifty murals by the time Martinez was contracted to work on the Mexican pavilion in 1976, and the gallery was offering free walking tours of the murals on weekends. Furthermore, Goez artist David Botello produced detailed illustrated maps of East Los Angeles for tourists that included the locations of 271 individual murals that had been identified by April 1, 1975 (Davalos 2011, 33–35). Beyond Goez, Chicano music of the time also supported blurring geographic lines between Mexico and the United States on the basis of culture through lyrics that mixed spatially fixed links to a band's local community in the United States with North and Latin American musical influences, as well as English and Spanish languages. Perhaps the most successful representative of this movement was the group Los Lobos del Este de Los Angeles (later renamed Los Lobos), who released their first album, *Just Another Band from East L.A.*, in 1978 (Pérez-Torres, 2006, 89).

The sense of a cultural florescence in the barrio of East LA further led a representative of the Smithsonian Institute to approach Goez's artists, including Martinez, to represent their local culture during the Festival of American Folklife held on the National Mall in Washington, DC, in 1975. This culture was represented by the artists painting a mural, described in the festival's brochure as being "from the East Los Angeles community" (González 2013, 216–220; Smithsonian Institution 1975, 10). Martinez also originally planned to celebrate the Mexican muralist tradition that was interwoven with the rising cultural prestige of East LA on El Rio del Tiempo, however this section was eliminated as the ride was considered too long.²⁴

An article in a September 1982 company newsletter about EPCOT Center's development illustrates the connection made within Disney between the cultural authenticity of the Mexico pavilion and the positioning of its creative team within this new cultural geography of Los Angeles. Under the headline "World Showcase Comes to Life in LA Barrio," the article spoke of how in the "predominantly Mexican-American barrio" of Lincoln Heights just outside of Los Angeles, "past houses marked with the Chicano graffiti of street gangs" were located the offices and workrooms for the Mexico pavilion. Within these offices, a team made up of "sculptors and painters, modelmakers and designers from WED Enterprises [then

23. "Murals Changing Face of East L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1973; "Chicano Art Blooms in Barrio Warehouse," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1974; "Art Flows from Chicano Barrios," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 6, 1979.

24. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

the name of Disney's theme park design division], the Disney design organization and a team from the Chicano community" were "creating Mexico's story in a realistic, entertaining way."²⁵

Particularly telling about this article is how the author reworks the geography of the Mexico pavilion's creation to suggest local associations within Los Angeles that accorded with Mexican American cultural production. The Lincoln Heights facility was in reality only used by choreographer Florencio Yescas and his dancers for rehearsals and the production of costumes. The vast majority of the pavilion had actually been designed and created at facilities owned by Disney's theme park division several miles to the northwest in the city of Glendale.²⁶

AZTLÁN AT EPCOT CENTER

The symbolic if not always factual association drawn by Disney between the Mexico pavilion's claim to authenticity and its relationship to the artistic and cultural productions of East LA suggests the rising success of Mexican American groups in appropriating Mexican identity by the time of the pavilion's opening. The participation of Florencio Yescas and his *Esplendor Azteca* dancers in *El Rio del Tiempo* is furthermore suggestive of the complex nature of the production of Mexican American identities during the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, Yescas's work in the United States shows how postrevolutionary indigenismo and the concept of *mestizaje* took on new meanings in the context of experiences of marginalization felt by many Mexican Americans. The privileged place given to pre-Columbian imagery in the Mexico pavilion similarly can be read as reflecting not solely touristic expectations of Mexico as a land of pyramids but also the importance of pre-Columbian imagery to Mexican American cultural production at the time the pavilion was built.

Martinez states that he decided to prominently showcase Mesoamerican cultures in *El Rio del Tiempo* due to his own personal interest. This interest was first sparked by his journey to Mexico with González in 1975. It was then rekindled when he led Aragon and the chief designer of the *El Rio del Tiempo* show model, Charangsee Aiumopasis, on a tour of Mexico that included the Mayan archeological sites of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, Tulum, Palenque, Bonampak, and Yaxchilán on the southeastern Yucatán Peninsula, the Teotihuacán ruins in Mexico's central highlands, and museums including the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City (Martinez 2009).²⁷ Martinez further approached Yescas to work on the pavilion as the choreographer of the pre-Columbian dancers who were filmed for the first section of the ride after the two were introduced by a mutual friend.²⁸

The scenes of *El Rio del Tiempo* in which Yescas and his dancers participated were designed to celebrate preconquest life and knowledge in what was to

25. "World Showcase Comes to Life in L.A. Barrio," *EPCOT Center Today* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 2.

26. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 28, 2013.

27. "World Showcase Comes to Life in L.A. Barrio," *EPCOT Center Today* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 2.

28. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, July 28, 2013.

become Mexico. The sets and costumes that framed the choreography of Yescas's dancers were designed by Aragon.²⁹ While some of the dancers' costumes were put together by the Disneyland wardrobe department, most of them were assembled under Aragon's supervision by the dancers themselves in the houses rented in Lincoln Heights (Ghez 2011, 293). Martinez also brought in archeology PhD candidate John Pohl from UCLA as an expert on pre-Columbian writing systems and Aztec and Mayan art to advise on the representation of pre-Columbian cultures.³⁰

Yescas's importance to these scenes was, according to Martinez, that he "brought his subjective knowledge to the project, his own experiences as an Aztec priest, dancer, and native Mexican. That couldn't be found in any book."³¹ An internal publication for pavilion employees further described the dancers featured in the ride as having ethnic backgrounds that "varied from Aztec to Mexican American, and all had the knowledge and/or experience of pre-Columbian cultures and dances" (EPCOT Center 1982, 2). Such descriptions portrayed Yescas and the Esplendor Azteca dancers as a direct connection both to Mexico as a physical place and particularly to the Aztecs as a culture that provided modern Mexico's primordial roots.

Yescas and the *la danza* movement did, in fact, help pioneer circuits of direct cultural exchange between particularly the southwest United States and Mexico based on the idea of connecting with preconquest Mesoamerican cultures. In Mexico, Yescas had been a significant figure in the promotion of *danza azteca*. According to scholar and *danzante* Enrique Masetas, the promotion of *danza azteca* was in part a movement aimed to recover indigenous languages and culture through a process that reversed the colonial dynamic under the name of *La Conquista* (Ceseña 2009, 83). During the 1950s, Yescas helped popularize and develop the style through his involvement with the high-profile Ballet Folklórico de México as well as the *La Danza* movement under Manuel Pineda in Mexico City (Aguilar 2009, 4; De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2012, 25).

While *danza azteca* was not unknown in the United States, and Yescas himself had taught folkloric dance in Los Angeles and Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s (Colín 2014, 26; Valencia and Polkinhorn 1994, 129), *La Conquista* spread north of the border beginning in the late-1960s as the Chicano movement began to increasingly look toward Mexican indigenista imagery for inspiration when formulating a new identity. Yescas is cited alongside Andrés Seguro in the few histories of this movement as one of the two individuals who, in response, brought *La Conquista* north of the border (Ceseña 2009, 84; Colín 2014, 25). In 1974, Yescas was invited to relocate to the United States by La Raza Cultural Center in San Diego, where students of Yescas formed the dance group *Toltecas en Aztlán*, and Yescas taught classes in folklore to Mexican American youth. Yescas soon moved on to Los An-

29. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, July 7, 2013.

30. "World Showcase Comes to Life in L.A. Barrio," *EPCOT Center Today* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 2; Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, May 10, 2013.

31. "World Showcase Comes to Life in L.A. Barrio," *EPCOT Center Today* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 2.

geles, where he oversaw the Esplendor Azteca dance group that was featured in *El Rio del Tiempo* (De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2012, 25; Hellier-Tenoco 2011, 147–149; Hutchinson 2009, 206–225; Ceseña 2009, 83–85).

The preconquest history of Mexico was not generally read by Mexican Americans in the same way indigenismo and the idea of *mestizaje* had been promoted by the cultural institutions of the Mexican state. In the context of postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism, *mestizaje* signified a progressive movement beginning with an historic indigenous civilization and ending with that of the “modern” Mexican. By the 1970s, this conception had begun to come under criticism within Mexico as a form of internal colonialism that sought to dissolve indigenous culture and selectively appropriate its elements for the creation of a homogenous postrevolutionary national culture (De la Peña 2005; Gutiérrez 1998; Lomnitz 2000; Warman et al. 1970).

In contrast, indigenismo and *mestizaje* came to portray a hybrid form of identity that rejected fixed, binary categories of culture and nationality in Mexican American representational practice (Davalos 2001, 27). Thus, as Rafael Pérez-Torres (2006, 12) argues, “where mestizo identity in a Latin American context simultaneously evokes and erases the place of the indigenous, mestizo identity in a U.S. context promises and denies a sense of citizenship, enfranchisement, and belonging. Racial and national (mis)identification are collapsed, effecting a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion.” Invocations of pre-Columbian Aztec goddesses and a *mestiza* identity by feminist Mexican American authors, among whom philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) was particularly important, further used indigenista imagery to highlight the intersections of multiple forms of marginality, including those stemming from patriarchy and heterosexism within Chicano nationalism (Chávez 2002, 5; Pérez-Torres 2006, 23–29).

One distinctive idea that emerged from these complex Mexican American readings of indigenismo was that of *Aztlán* as a Chicano spiritual homeland that spread across the *contemporary* United States-Mexico border (Aguilar 2009, 3; Ceseña 2009, 86–87; De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2012, 26). Described as the original homeland from which the Mexica set out to found their capital Tenochtitlán at what is now Mexico City, *Aztlán* provided an alternative historical and geographical framework for a collective Mexican American identity. This framework challenged the modern idea of the nation-state and national borders between Mexico and the United States, proposing an alternative cartography of belonging that pre-dated European conquest and roughly corresponded to the land lost by Mexico to the United States during the Mexican American War in 1848 (Pérez-Torres 2006, 146–147). At its base, the idea of *Aztlán* allowed for various interpretations and, in its use of indigenous imagery, *Aztlán* can be read in a broad sense as a productive cultural tool that worked to raise consciousness of collective marginalization through a series of shared symbols.

The precise relationship to the representation of Mexico at EPCOT Center and Mexican American appropriations of indigenista imagery at this time is difficult to determine. Yescas and *danza azteca* were closely intertwined with the spread of the concept of *Aztlán*, and Yescas had worked closely with the poet Alurista,

whose 1969 *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* was an important early document in the popularizing of the concept (Ceseña 2009, 86). Longtime instructor and historian of Mexican folkloric dance in Los Angeles Benjamin Hernandez describes the legacy of Yescas as being “intrinsically formulated with the utopian Aztec identity Chicanos have in the American Southwest” (Rodríguez 2000, 106–112; Shay 2006, 84). Following his death in 1985, Yescas’s influence continued to be felt as his disciples founded dance groups in Los Angeles, San Diego, Pasadena, Phoenix, and New Mexico. These groups further spurred the creation of other cultural and political groups based around *la danza* as a form of “re-telling” the past in response to the exigencies of the present (Aguilar 2009, 3; Ceseña 2009, 86–87; De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2012, 26).

However, such ideas were not directly referenced in the Mexico pavilion. The progressive narrative of Mexico’s “three cultures” referenced in *El Rio del Tiempo* was not notably distinct from presentations of Mexican history in state-run Mexican museums or indeed the historical narrative of postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism more generally. Furthermore, the Porfirio Díaz government had also chosen to represent Mexico in a pavilion resembling an Aztec temple at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition in a gesture representative of embryonic prerevolutionary visions of a *mestizo* Mexican nationalism (Tenorio Trillo 1996, 64–65).

What is certain is that EPCOT Center’s Mexico pavilion was strongly shaped by an indigenista aesthetic. The entire pavilion was housed inside a pre-Columbian inspired structure and designed so that visitors first encountered a small museum themed as an interior chamber featuring pre-Columbian artifacts. This approach was taken to make “a statement by showing guests a sampling of what Cortés and his followers found in these sophisticated civilizations in the 1500s” (EPCOT Center 1982, 1). Perhaps the way in which the Mexico pavilion was most suggestive of Mexican American readings of indigenismo and *mestizaje* stemmed from how these concepts were translated into the medium of the theme park attraction in a manner that blurred distinctions of time and space. Visitors to the Mexico pavilion could, for example, walk or take a boat back and forth between pre- and postconquest Mexicos, and watch filmed scenes of preconquest Mexico featuring the *Esplendor Azteca* dancers that were just as vivid as scenes depicting tourists in contemporary Mexican beach resorts.

That the participation of Yescas and *Esplendor Azteca* in the *El Rio del Tiempo* ride came about due to a personal introduction made by a mutual friend also provides a glimpse into the cultural milieu in which both were operating at this time. Martinez described Yescas as becoming his mentor on Aztec thought and culture during his work on the Mexico pavilion, and his work on the pavilion led Martinez to become increasingly engaged in exploring indigenous themes and particularly Aztlán in his art.³² The ways in which indigenista imagery was incorporated into the design of the Mexico pavilion is thus perhaps best understood as representative of how Mexican Americans during the 1970s and 1980s were looking at established images of *lo mexicano* originating in Mexico. This process implied neither a recovery of an “authentic” past nor a wholesale acceptance of

32. Eddie Martinez, correspondence with author, July 28, 2013.

state-promoted visions of Mexican nationalism. Instead, it involved a rereading and reworking of such imagery in the production of new identities that responded to their contemporary context within the United States.

CONCLUSION

The context and creation of the Mexico pavilion demonstrates a complex, transnational, and multidirectional process through which images of Mexico were shaped and reshaped in the United States during the twentieth century. Mexico was represented at EPCOT Center in a way that was well able to pass the tourist's test of authenticity. In its design, the pavilion corresponded to images of Mexican geography, history, and culture popularized through the promotion of Mexico as a tourist destination in the United States for roughly four decades prior to the pavilion's opening. These images also reflected the efforts of Mexican state cultural institutions in the postrevolutionary period to create the image of a homogenous mestizo Mexican national culture. However, the involvement of Eddie Martinez, Ray Aragon, and Florencio Yescas in the Mexico pavilion's development also demonstrates the important role that Mexican Americans were playing in shaping imaginings of Mexico in the United States in the decade prior to the pavilion's opening.

When EPCOT Center opened in 1982, a series of eight national pavilions could be more or less simultaneously viewed from around World Showcase's large central lagoon as completely self-contained units, each with a culture and history that was immediately and visibly distinguishable from that of its neighbors. Amid this panorama, however, the Mexico pavilion stood out for the way in which it was shaped by the rise of a cultural movement that was problematizing such visions in relation to Mexico and the United States. In the production of a new Mexican American identity, Mexico came to represent a symbolic rather than physical homeland or point of origin. Expressions of Mexican heritage also became a way of both making claims to cultural legitimacy and highlighting ways in which Mexican Americans continued to be excluded or marginalized within the United States. There was thus a certain irony at the core of EPCOT Center's Mexico pavilion. In order to ensure that Mexico was authentically represented as part of a miniaturized world divided into culturally distinct nation-states, Disney officials had in fact looked for guidance to East LA and a cultural movement that implicitly challenged this very premise.

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