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Taquerías Conversas: Latinx Immigrants Remake the Flickering Urban Landscape of Phoenix

Kristin Koptiuch

Abstract
Dynamic digital visualization modeled after the erstwhile social media app Vine provokes unexpected insight into Latinx immigrants’ vibrant impact on Arizona cityscapes. The author’s para-cinematic micro-movie loops track the affective resonances elicited by an evocative form of the architectural uncanny that haunts everyday urbanism in metro Phoenix: taquerias. Intensive immigration brought drive-thru Mexican taquerias, which commonly inhabit structures abandoned by iconic American (now global) fast-food chains (DQ, BK, KFC…), colonizing dead spaces abandoned by sprawl’s centrifugal pull. Taquerias have helped to revive stagnant neighborhood economies, catered to an immigrant-inflected palate, and added Latin cultural flair to Phoenix’s subdued design palette. The movie loops endlessly reenact the “conversion” from fast-food chain to taqueria, performatively disclosing the homely architecture “buried alive” beneath Mexicanized, magical-realist redesign. Like a surrealist’s found object, taquerias conversas trigger affective associations as they conjure prosthetic links to the city’s (Mexican, indigenous) past and inscribe border-crossing transnationalization into vernacular city spaces. As Latinx irrefutably remake the city, many Anglo Phoenicians experience an unsettling psycho-spatial estrangement. By adopting a multimodal approach, the performative effects of the video loops create a dizzying affective experience for the reader, modeling the similarly unsettling experience of driving through the changing Phoenix cityscape. Taquerias conversas upend dominant place-making dynamics, setting in play a migrant-driven, insurgent urbanism that swerves beyond city boosters’ defensive vision of sundrenched uniformity toward embracing a complex, inclusive, transnationalized urban future.
This paper adopts dynamic digital visualization modeled after the erstwhile social media smart phone app Vine to provoke unexpected insight into Latinx immigrants’ vibrant impact on Phoenix, Arizona cityscapes. It deploys multimodal ethnographics in the form of para-cinematic micro-movie loops that I created in the course of my fieldwork as an urban ethnographer and visual anthropologist trying to decipher the strangely un-urban urbanism of metropolitan Phoenix, where I’ve lived for over twenty years. My gambit here is that Vine’s incessantly looped six-second micro-movies offer to visual urbanists a ready tool to capture performative aspects of “life in motion” (the Vine app’s pitch line) in our neighborhoods and cities. Specifically, the video loops provided track the affective resonances elicited by an unlikely but evocative form of the architectural uncanny that I argue haunts everyday urbanism in metro Phoenix: the 24-hour drive-thru taqueria.

In the current era of unprecedented human mobilities, a primary feature among the urban dynamics of life in motion is surely the growing presence of transnational migrants, whose lives are both transforming cities and being transformed by them. Intensive immigration to Phoenix brought a proliferation of Mexican taquerias, which commonly inhabit structures abandoned by iconic American fast-food chains (DQ, BK, KFC...), colonizing dead spaces abandoned by urban sprawl’s centrifugal pull. Like other immigrant-initiated enterprises, taquerias have helped to revive stagnant neighborhood economies, catered to an immigrant-inflected palate, and added Latin cultural flair to Phoenix’s subdued design palette. As we shall see, the video loops endlessly reenact the “conversion” from fast-food chain to taqueria, performatively disclosing the homely architecture “buried alive” beneath Mexicanized, magical-realist redesign. By adopting a multimodal approach, the video loops are meant to be as performative for the reader as they are visually illustrative of my interpretative analysis of the city’s life in motion. The paper thus explores what urban ethnographers, residents, and planners can learn from the taquerias and their uncanny, repurposed architecture punctuating the cityscape of a changing, increasingly transnationalized Phoenix. But through the performative effects of the video loops themselves, the paper also aims to create a dizzying affective experience for the reader, which models the similarly unsettling experience of driving through the changing Phoenix cityscape.

I had not even heard of the Vine app until I responded to a call from Kristin M. Sullivan for papers for a panel of presenters experimenting with Vine and visual anthropology at the 2014 Society for Applied Anthropology meetings. As a bit of a technophile, I just knew I wanted to try using the app in my work, and I developed a very preliminary version of this paper for that conference.¹ Vine was common-

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“When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the ‘double’ being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted – a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The ‘double’ has become a thing of terror...”
Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny.”
Standard Edition Volume XVII. Page 236
ly used by youth as social media for jokey purposes and its potential as a research tool was woefully underutilized by scholars. Alas, Vine was as subject to obsolescence as any digital technology. Developed as a mobile phone app, Vine was quickly acquired by Twitter and launched in 2013. In October 2016, Twitter announced it would discontinue the service for new looped video posts, although downloads and viewing of existing videos would continue. By December 2016, Twitter had reconsidered its decision and announced that although Vine would remain operational, its videos would be published to Twitter instead of to the Vine community website. I started this project using Vine, but after its stability became questionable, I shot phone or camera videos and edited them to retain Vine’s six-second video loop structure to create the micro-movies in this paper. Whereas there is nothing magical about sticking with Vine’s six seconds for the videos (eight- or ten-second loops could work equally well), their looped repetition is of paramount importance for capturing life in motion.

I recommend that readers watch each video loop repeated through several times to become ensconced in its spatial and temporal performative effects. It is difficult to anticipate the disappearance of a fast-food site prior its transformation into a taqueria, to capture the “before” in video, before it’s already become the “after.” Unexpectedly, the formerly intact and functioning fast-food structure suddenly closes and gets cordoned off, abandoned, derelict; some weeks or months later, it reappears transformed into a taqueria, its architecture recognizably haunted by its branded fast-food past. In some cases, therefore, my videos combine two different sites where existing structures retain the same architectural form (a still-functioning DQ at one site and an already converted taqueria now operating at a former DQ site). In other cases, I recovered a still image of the precedent site using the history feature of Google Maps Street View. I have included just a sample of these videos in this paper.

The prevalence of such fast-food-to-taqueria conversions in Phoenix, along with a range of other immigrant-initiated urban redesign elements, suggests that flying below the radar of official planning instruments and public acknowledgement, migrants have been busily transforming our collective urban environments. Indeed, as the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) World Migration Report 2015 on migrants and cities expounds at length, in the field and practice of urban planning, immigrants are “generally overlooked in global discourses on urbanization and cities” (p. 1). The IOM’s assessment seems overly broad, however, in light of recent urban planning scholarship on US Latinx immigrants and diaspora communities. Coincident with intensification of Latinx migration to US cities, from the late 1990s lively scholarly debate and research on Latino urbanism, barrio urbanism, Latino New Urbanism, and placemaking in Latinx communities explicitly tackled the neglect of immigrant and diasporic ethno-racial communities in the literature and policy on planning and urban design. (See for example, Diaz and Torres 2012; Lara 2018; Rios and Vazquez 2012). David Diaz’s assessment of urban planning literature in relation to “Barrio urbanism” (2005) and the structural underdevelopment of urban Chicana/o communities, found that planners had basically been missing in action, at least since the early 20th C when planning emerged during the progressive era and social
reform movements targeted European immigrant neighborhoods in industrial cities of the northeast. Curiously, Diaz’s usage of Chicana/o urbanism in Los Angeles has the effect of merging especially post-1990s immigrants from Mexico and Central America into a generic Latinx population. This elision may serve Diaz’s purpose but is not entirely helpful for assessing the distinctiveness of the impact of immigrants on urban change. For example, Gerardo Sandoval’s study of the planned revitalization of the Los Angeles neighborhood of MacArthur Park explicitly foregrounds the Central American immigrant community’s agency in utilizing its dynamic transnational linkages, and cultural and political capital to influence redevelopment that benefitted rather than displaced its current residents (2009). Sandoval offers this case as an alternative model for planners’ engagement with immigrant neighborhoods. In Arizona, geographer Daniel Arre-ola (2012) regards the slow, cumulative vernacular placemaking that results from a deep cultural investment by immigrant and non-immigrant ethnic Mexicans in segregated Phoenix neighborhoods as antithetical to efforts by Latinx urbanism planners to introduce standardized replication of similar design elements.

Yet the taquerias I discuss here are “designed” in a formalized way, with replicated design and branding elements used across multiple franchise locations that also comply with commercial zoning ordinances. These designs are nonetheless as recognizably Latinx-inspired as is their cuisine, even if not steeped in the incremental vernacular implemented by Latinx barrio residents. And although I don’t address them here at length, besides Latinx, migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean also have drawn on diasporic inspiration to put their imprint on Phoenix cityscapes. Thus, for this research, I am inclined to endorse the perspective of what planner Ananya Roy (2011) calls “critical transnationalism.” By exploring the meaning-making effects of the taquerias’ surprising interruption of Phoenix’s bland, repetitive urbanism, my interest is in the taquerias’ inscription of border-crossing transnationalism into the rationally planned city’s normative vernacular spaces, tactics of transnational disruption of the dominant place-making dynamics.

I readily admit to being especially keen on using digital visualization to document the many ways that transnational migrants contribute to creative, innovative change in the city (see Koptiuch 2018). But here, I explicitly aim to deploy Vine’s repetitive digital visualizations to provoke viewers to critically appreciate the full spectrum of urban life-in-motion underway across the cityscape. My hope is that digitally mediated performative images can break through the impasse that so often hinders constructive appreciation of immigrants’ innovative impact on urban design and blocks our capacity to imagine, and to desire, a more inclusive, transnational urbanism (Smith 2001).

Can dynamic visualization expand awareness of immigrants’ “right to the city” (Harvey 2008)? Can it coax viewers to embrace the migrants’ cultural hybridity and global connectivity to challenge the pervasive retreat into fragmentation, privatization, and surveilled exclusivity that so often results in the disconsolate sense of unlivable disequilibrium encountered in the controlled everyday urbanism of the neoliberal city’s public sphere?
Conversos

The notion of *taquerias conversas* developed here extracts a metaphor of performative practice from the historic *conversos* of the US Southwest. The term *converso/a*, Spanish and Portuguese for “convert” (from Latin conversus, “converted, turned around”), refers to Jews and Muslims who under pain of death had been forced to flee into exile or to convert to Roman Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition in the late 1400s and early 1500s (Hordes 2005). With the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain and later Portugal, some conversos became part of the colonizing mission in New Spain, including what is now the American Southwest. Descendants of so-called crypto-Jews secretly practised Jewish rituals while publicly adhering to other faiths, and over time, losing conscious knowledge of what their private rituals meant yet retaining their form without content.³

There has been a great deal of fascinating scholarly and popular controversy about these practices, notably among New Mexican Hispanos, who claim descent from Spanish colonial settlers. In a recent insightful example, Michael P. Caroll (2002) proposes reasons to challenge the received notion of conversos. He notes that in many ways resurgent Judaic practices mirrored indigenous peoples’ maintenance of their traditions practised loosely under Roman Catholic veil. In addition, as is well known, colonial Catholicism itself was syncretic, absorbing indigenous traditions and creating a creole double of itself. The first victims of rituals of public penance (*auto de fé*) of the Mexican Inquisition were indigenous converts convicted of heresy, as well as crypto-Jews convicted of relapsing into their ancestral faith. Caroll persuasively argues that in the 1970s and 1980s, it may have been more a matter of claims to social status (European origin) and racial hierarchy (white privilege) that led New Mexican Hispano converso descendants to ‘come out’ as Jews. Contemporary scholars view conversos as ethnographic allegory, he suggests, whereas for the tourist industry conversos have profitably become an aspect of the Orientalizing of New Mexico. Doubtless, a social-psychoanalytic perspective could add yet another angle of interpretation.

Here, I adapt the term conversos as a regionally apt metaphor derived from the conversos’ performative practice, the better to capture the way in which this uncanny sense of (mis)recognition discloses how “what ought to have remained hidden has come to light,” as Freud famously put it. But beyond the metaphorical, I also wish to preserve awareness of the racialized materiality of the historical violence inflicted by forcible conversion from one belief system (Judaism, Islam) to another (Christianity).

I make no claim that the taquerias conversas discussed here “represent” the aesthetics, values, tastes, desires of “all” Latinx or immigrants in Phoenix. Often upon learning about my project, middle class Latinx confess to me their preference for national chains like Chipotle or even Taco Bell, to meet their expectations of standardized uniformity and “cleanliness” of restaurant environment and cuisine. Mexican immigrants have averred that the taquerias are no match for their own (or mom’s) home cooking. Complexities of intersectionality between ethnic identity and class difference, degree of acculturation, and national origins obviate against simplified overgeneralizations. In Arizona’s contentious political climate, emergent tensions
between long-term, multigenerational Latinx US citizens and immigrant newcomers have been also reflected in election results favoring anti-immigrant legislation or candidates.

I note too that taquerias conversas are often the subject of suspicion, derision, and mockery. I have heard many Phoenicians demur at the prospect of eating at drive-thru taquerias, alleging that the restaurants are “dirty” and diners at risk of food poisoning; they’d rather eat what even they recognize to be cardboard-cut-out Mexican food at a reliably standardized Taco Bell. I suspect that this preference could not be deterred even by the well-publicized recurring outbreaks of illness in 2017 from “food with integrity” at more upscale Chipotle chain restaurants. In 2010, at the height of Arizona’s nativist politics and anti-immigrant legislation, a blog by Urban Cynic posted a parody to be sung by “Lady Guacamole” to the tune of Lady Gaga’s “Alejandro,” about one of Phoenix’s drive-thru taqueria mainstays, Filiberto’s, mocking the quality of its food and staff. The kind of squeamishness and unbridled distaste that deter some people from traveling abroad to Mexico may keep them from entering a taqueria conversa, as if this would be tantamount to crossing the border itself.

Phoenix’s Turning Demographics and Colonization by Taqueria
In an era and place that would sooner squelch (especially Mexican) immigrant visibility at every turn, Phoenix holds immigrants in abundance. Since the mid-1990s, the border state of Arizona experienced intensive immigration, primarily by those displaced from post-NAFTA Mexico. Incoming foreign-born migration to the city has declined in recent years, from 135% increase in 1990-2000 to 40% increase in 2000-2014. The mid-decade US Census stats for 2015 estimates that 20% of the City of Phoenix population of 1,563,025 is foreign born, and 65% of these migrants are from Mexico; 40% of the population is Latinx (for the larger metro area the percentage is lower, 30%, an index of white flight to Phoenix’s outer suburb cities). Despite the anti-immigrant public sentiment and legislative policymaking that emerged in response to rapid demographic change, businesses readily integrated migrants into the labor force, and K-12 educators retooled to teach growing numbers of ESL students. As in other cities, Phoenix immigrant entrepreneurs started new businesses at higher rates disproportionate to their low percentage of the population (Kosten 2018).

Most pertinent to this discussion, dozens of 24-hour drive-thru taquerias popped up across the metro midsection, catering to immigrants and US-born Latinx as well as to anyone who loves Mexican food, which has become as ubiquitous and integral to American food cultures as Italian and Chinese cuisines. These Mexican fast-food restaurants are commonly housed in structures formerly occupied by iconic American (now global) fast-food franchises (DQ, McD, BK, KFC, Taco Bell, Wendy’s, Jack in the
entanglements: Taquerias Conversas

Box, etc.). Despite having been rebranded and refurbished with rather different, in this instance, Mexicanized décor, the familiar architectural form of former fast-food-chain outlets usually remains visually legible in the taquerias. After all, fast-food chains invested a great deal in deploying highly standardized architectural images to epitomize and market their brand recognition. The iconic structures are designed for efficiency within, and eye-catching, instant, drive-by recognizability on the exterior, appropriating elements of modernism’s soaring futurist design more as cosmetic branding than as functional form (Langdon 1985). Ever since the twin parabolic curves of the first golden-arched McDonald’s franchise opened in Phoenix in May 1953 at the southwest corner of Central Avenue and Indian School Road, an area then-considered a newly developing north Phoenix but now squarely in the middle of the city’s expansive sprawl-scape, Americans have been semiotically well-trained to recognize at a glance the distinctive architectural branding of corporate fast-food chains. As the video loops confirm, our well-disciplined eye gives us a kind of psychic, x-ray vision, if you will, capable of seeing clear through Mexicanized makeovers—only to be nonplussed by a disconcerting flash of recognition of the fast-food-chain architecture buried within. Hence, taquerias conversas.

In a word, the taquerias conversas have colonized the obsolete structures abandoned by familiar fast-food paragons. The original franchise outlets either went out of business as urban sprawl’s centrifugal pull sucked away their former customer base, or moved to new locations (sometimes just up the street) to comply with the parent company’s architectural rebranding. This formal business abandonment and disinvestment laid out the conditions under which informality flourishes, what I have elsewhere called a kind of third-worlding at home (Koptiuch 1997). A form of planning-from-below, or as architect Teddy Cruz (2009) dubbed it, “stealth urbanism,” immigrants moved taquerias into these dead spaces and reinvigorated stagnant neighborhood economies. But they did so without the prototypical gentrifier’s lust for displacement of those deemed unfit for hipster or revanchist neighborhood recapitalization; instead the taquerias enact a transnational worlding that corroborates the city’s evolving demographics. They cater to the same Latinx immigrant-inflected palate that has led salsa to overtake ketchup as the go-to favorite American condiment and add Latin cultural flair to challenge the compulsory tasteful tans dominating the city’s subdued design palette. Their characteristic bilingual signage and retail staff encourage patronage by Latinx immigrant and diaspora clientele, making taquerias cultural mediators widening the linguistic crack in predominantly English-only environments.

Not surprisingly, a GIS mapping of the widespread proliferation of taquerias conversas across metro Phoenix shows that they are located especially across areas with high concentrations of Latinx immigrants. This proliferation, along with the vague

See HTML version for accompanying video content

Figure 2. Video #2 BK/Julioberto’s Converso [mp4 video]
Caption: Burger King to Julioberto’s Taqueria Conversa, Phoenix.
Photographed at two different locations, video produced by the author.
recognition by Phoenicians of the taquerias’ inhabitation of familiar iconographic architecture, now lends an uncertain queasiness to the urban flâneur’s drive through the cityscape (Phoenicians rarely assume the prototypical modernist flâneur’s pedestrian position in order to grasp this city that is more surround than center; its commercial arcades, the strolling flâneur’s classic domain in the 19th C modernist city, are now enclosed in gigantic shopping malls set apart from the streets, marooned in vast open-air parking lots). Instead of the usual reiteration of hallowed fast-food-chain brands hailing from the nation’s epitome era of mid-20th century modernism (at its acme of economic solvency, global political sovereignty, white supremacy), a repetition of Mexicanized makeovers now magically transmogrifies much of the city’s built environment. The spiraling impact of this dizzying repetition of taquerias conversas is further accentuated by a seemingly diabolical algorithm for naming taquerias, which inexplicably replays name fragments in confounding, endless permutations: Filiberto’s, Julioberto’s, Humberto’s, Roberto’s, Rolberto’s, Eriberto’s, Los Berto’s, Beto’s, Fidelberto’s, Floriberto’s, Hilberto’s, Poliberto’s, Raliberto’s, Rodeberto’s, Tediberto’s, Kingberto’s (of course, not all the taquerias conversas encode Berto/Beto in their monikers, but huge numbers of them do) Figure 6.

**Figure 3:** (left) Map of 107 taquerias conversas across metropolitan Phoenix. Locations drawn from 2015 US Census and Maricopa County business data and company websites. Conversion from iconic fast food to taqueria was verified by windshield survey and/or the history feature of Google Maps Street View. All maps created in collaboration with Dr. Mary Whelan, Geospatial and Research Data Manager in the Research and Development Department at the Arizona State University Libraries.

**Figure 4:** Map of taquerias conversas in relation to foreign born population in metropolitan Phoenix, based on 2015 US Census data. Map by Mary Whelan.

**Figure 5:** Map of taquerias conversas in relation to Hispanic population in metropolitan Phoenix, based on 2015 US Census data. Map by Mary Whelan.
It is important to note that these drive-thru taquerias conversas cut a far more substantial figure in the urban built environment than the more ephemeral mobile taco trucks that became the subject of controversy during the 2016 presidential campaign. The Latinx founder of Latinos for Trump issued a dire warning to those rallying against candidate Trump’s anti-immigration platform: if Mexican cultural influence is not checked, America will find “taco trucks on every corner” (Chokshi 2016). Although the televised statement elicited an avalanche of critique and humorous, sarcastic backlash on social media with the trending meme #TacosOnEveryCorner, Mr. Trump’s presidency continues to follow through on many facets of his promised platform on immigration and to pander to the racial resentment held by many white Americans, which Carol Anderson (2016) so aptly names “white rage.” Tacos and taquerias, then, clearly make far more than merely a culinary contribution to US culture. Their proliferation across the Phoenix cityscape attains a certain symbolic and political gravitas well-beyond their ostensibly mundane form and purpose.

In Phoenix, taqueria proliferation too, casts an indelible shadow on the relentlessly sundrenched urbanism advocated by Anglo Phoenician boosters. Announcing itself in exuberant neon orange, lime green, or luminous fuchsia, this “shadow” is an irrefutable sign of the city’s diasporic remaking by Latinx immigrants. Try as it might to impose on sprawling masterplanned residential subdivisions an ethnically-evading aesthetic of tasteful, desert-toned, cookie-cutter homes and matching commercial signage (up in the exclusive highlands of north Scottsdale the McD arches must be colored tan), even the hegemonic Real Estate Industrial Complex (Talton 2009) could not curtail the emergent influence of a burgeoning immigrant popu-
The urban figure of the taqueria conversa reverberates as a sign that Latinx immigrants have seized space, colonizing iconic architectural structures to sell (and consume) not the proverbial American burger, but tacos.

In so doing, they opportunistically have instantiated their right to the city and credibly carved out what anthropologist James Holston (2008) calls spaces of insurgent citizenship. Taquerías conversas are tantamount to migrants planting a flag in a battle for urban space now ongoing in cities across the globe; they stand in counterpoint to the suffocating structural violence experienced due to many modes of anti-immigrant surveillance, socioeconomic marginalization, denigration and demonization of the thickly-social embedness of barrio neighborhoods (even as New Urbanists seek to reinvent this vitality lost in suburban sprawl by starting from scratch in masterplanned “communities” rigid with strict regulatory governance that becomes its own unrecognized brand of magical realism, leapfrogging unsustainably across the desert landscape). Migrants’ visually compelling seizure of urban space, epitomized by the taqueria conversa, obliges a reimagining of the city that re-adjudicates between displacement and belonging (Malpas and Jacobs 2016)—not for immigrants only, but for all Phoenicians.

Besides taquerias, Phoenix has also experienced a Latinoization of iconic retail outlet brands for supermarkets, grocery stores, restaurants, and even a former mall-anchor big-box department store whose interior was transformed into a mercado-style swap meet (or flea market) complete with a food court offering Mexican culinary favorites and a “town plaza” concocted out of the erstwhile mall lobby, which hosts popular Friday afternoon mariachi musicians and ballet folklorico. And there are also Asian conversos and increasingly, as resettled refugees find their economic footing in Phoenix, African, Middle Eastern, and post-Soviet diaspora conversos as well. In addition to the immigrant inspired innovations of these more formal enterprise conversos, including legions of immigrant-run shops located in strip-malls ubiquitous in many city neighborhoods (see Lara 2018), a host of informal entrepreneurs, often immigrants, engage in opportunistic urbanist tactics that may defy or fly below the radar of official Phoenix planning regulations: itinerant vendors traverse neighborhoods selling Mexican-style popsicles and other popular treats; pop-up entrepreneurs appeal to immigrant-inflected tastes by offering white corn preferred for tortilla making, local citrus, or bacon-wrapped Sonoran hot dogs, selling them out of decidedly non-hipster, seemingly ephemeral food trucks that nonetheless reliably reappear in what otherwise would be derelict or leftover urban spaces; “temporary” yard sales permanently

See HTML version for accompanying video content

Figure 7. Video #3 Home Depot/El Super Converso [mp4 video]
Caption: Home Depot to El Super converso, Phoenix. Video shot by the author at same location, but the façade has been substantially altered. Catering to Latinx customers, the supermarket is part of Grupo Chedraui, one of the largest supermarket chains in Mexico and with dozens of locations across the US Southwest.

Besides taquerias, Phoenix has also experienced a Latinoization of iconic retail outlet brands for supermarkets, grocery stores, restaurants, and even a former mall-anchor big-box department store whose interior was transformed into a mercado-style swap meet (or flea market) complete with a food court offering Mexican culinary favorites and a “town plaza” concocted out of the erstwhile mall lobby, which hosts popular Friday afternoon mariachi musicians and ballet folklorico. And there are also Asian conversos and increasingly, as resettled refugees find their economic footing in Phoenix, African, Middle Eastern, and post-Soviet diaspora conversos as well. In addition to the immigrant inspired innovations of these more formal enterprise conversos, including legions of immigrant-run shops located in strip-malls ubiquitous in many city neighborhoods (see Lara 2018), a host of informal entrepreneurs, often immigrants, engage in opportunistic urbanist tactics that may defy or fly below the radar of official Phoenix planning regulations: itinerant vendors traverse neighborhoods selling Mexican-style popsicles and other popular treats; pop-up entrepreneurs appeal to immigrant-inflected tastes by offering white corn preferred for tortilla making, local citrus, or bacon-wrapped Sonoran hot dogs, selling them out of decidedly non-hipster, seemingly ephemeral food trucks that nonetheless reliably reappear in what otherwise would be derelict or leftover urban spaces; “temporary” yard sales permanently
open at dawn and disappear at dusk. Such survival tactics of “clandestine urbanization” (Kamel 2016) ought not be romanticized as they flourish under conditions of persistent disinvestment and marginalization; but they do enlarge the scope of productive everyday urban life-in-motion that merits the attention of urbanists and residents alike.

The many well-attended weekend ethnic cultural festivals (Japanese, Irish, Salvadoran, Greek, Chinese New Year, Arab Americans, Indians, Native Americans, Germans, Italians, Cajuns, Iranians, world refugees, Mexicans—many of these, focused more particularly around salsa, chiles, mariachis, Sonorans, agave heritage, tamales, etc.—and more) held in Phoenix parks and other venues suggest that many relish the diverse diasporic cultures that now comprise Phoenix, just as they do many other cities in the US and elsewhere in our transnational era of human mobility (as studied by many researchers such as by Alarcon, Escala, Odgers 2016, Fong and Berry 2017, Koptiuch et al 2018, Lehrer and Sloan 2003, Zukin, Kasinitz and Chen 2015, Wiseman 2015). For others, these changes are perplexing or disturbing. For many Anglo Phoenicians accustomed to the obligatory homogeneous uniformity of suburban sprawl, the bewildering repetition-compulsion of the growing variety of commercial conversos evokes a foreboding, psycho-spatial estrangement. The city around them becomes hauntingly uncanny as its population demographically diversifies and, unbidden by city planners, immigrants grab hold of their right to the city even at a moment of dangerous anti-immigrant sentiment and policymaking. At the level of everyday urbanism, the Anglo booster’s domestic territoriality has become unfixed; Arizona’s metropolitan spaces have been indelibly, definitively transnationalized. Now the embodied spatial experience of traversing this Othered cityscape disassociates the habitual relationships between the Anglo flâneur’s body and the urban environment, pitching her into a dizzying fall from familiar solid ground, as if flung over a magical urbanist edge into an unknown abyss that somehow opened up right at her own doorstep. And yet she cannot look away.

How does this happen?

Multimodalities, Performativity, and the Urban Uncanny
It is my contention that whereas the video loops I have provided certainly do illustrate and visually document ways that the architectural structure and visual design of the taquerias conversas imbue the urban landscape with a haunting, uncanny presence, they also do much more. The loops’ repetitive-compulsion of the conversion from

See HTML version for accompanying video content

Figure 8. Video #4 KFC/Filiberto’s Taqueria Conversa [mp4 video] Caption: Kentucky Fried Chicken to Filiberto’s taqueria conversa, Phoenix. Photographs of same location, but KFC photo recovered using the history feature of Google Maps Street View, taqueria footage and video produced by the author.
classic fast food chain to taqueria also operates performatively: they create for the reader/viewer a dizzying affective experience that models the similarly unsettling experience of driving through the changing Phoenix cityscape. Savvy Phoenix residents may recall which familiar fast-food restaurant formerly occupied a specific site (or can sleuth it out using the history feature on Google Maps Street View). Astute readers of architectural form may knowledgeably identify the current structure’s underlying design, for instance a former Dairy Queen’s now obsolete Mansard roof structure (as in Figure 1), or a decapitated KFC cupola (as in Figure 8). But even the casual urban flâneur with no knowledge of a taqueria’s previous incarnation may subliminally register with vague familiarity the architectural iconography haunting each reincarnation, now camouflaged in exuberant Latin American colors and sporting magical realist signage and logos that beckon familiarity with the flourish of a handwritten signature (despite their being as industrially-produced as any iconic fast food logo). Following recent critical assessments of magical realism, the cultural function of the magical realist design of a taqueria’s exterior signage and interior decor is not to supply a sentimental indulgence of nostalgia for an immigrant’s irretrievable past or place. As Michael Valdez Moses (2001) points out for global magical realist novels, the hybridism of the realistic and the fabulous cannot easily be assimilated into a rationalistic worldview. And yet the taquerias, despite inhabiting abandoned iconic structures, do not present as a radical alternative antidote to the malaise of fast-food homogeneity; they simply exist side by side with paragon fast food outlets as quite compatible culinary enterprises—without acknowledging any tension between the magical and the real. The exotic, traditional Mexican ranchero cultural elements that frequently appear in the conversos’ magical realist design firmly re-root the migrant not in rural Mexico but in a transnationalized urban space well beyond the national border, even as they disconcertingly re-route everyday urbanism by integrating the Mexican marvelous into the rationality and materiality of the American cityscape.

Like a surrealist’s found object that evokes (social) memories and unexpected representational fragments, the taquerias conversas trigger affective associations. On the one hand, they figure prosthetic irruptions of the landscape’s historical (Mexican and indigenous) past into the urban present.⁶ On the other, they embody globalization’s transnational tectonic tear, uplifting new borders across vernacular city spaces. Their apparition recasts official urban imaginaries of the well-ordered, rational American city spaces, sending Anglo and Latinx viewers both back and beyond the now and here of domestic urban space-time. If Lauren Berlant is right in her book *Cruel Optimism*, that “the present is perceived, first, affectively,” then the temporal/spatial present intuited through the mediation of uncanny architecture embodied in the taqueria conversa surely provokes for many Anglo Phoenicians the intensity and enigmatic impact of an impasse (2011: 4). In Berlant’s terms, the impasse is “a space of time lived without a narrative genre” (Ibid: 199). In other words, affectively suspended in a bewildering moment of time-space compression, city residents have no adequate language for comprehending what the taqueria conversa means for telling what happens next in the urban story of Phoenix. Ananya Roy aptly casts this impasse for Arizona as a “temporal paralysis,” where future and past are denied, “a past that in this case interlocks the territories” of the US and Mexico (2011: 408).
As if caught in the temporal paralysis of an impasse, then, the six-second micro-movies endlessly replay with repetition-compulsion the conversion from iconic fast-food chain to taqueria. The dizzying video loop performatively discloses the secret, homely architectural form buried alive, as it were, in decisively unhomely fashion, capturing the unsettling, twin affective psycho-spatial resonances of estrangement and allure that is the uncanny. The endless replay of the underlying architecture and its re-design overlay works to de-domesticate the gaze of the viewing subject by exposing the global in the local. For Anthony Vidler in his book *The Architectural Uncanny*, the disturbances of the uncanny serve as architectural “metaphor for a fundamentally unlivable modern condition” (1992:x). Pushed further into our contemporary transnational era, the visually disquieting slippage of the architectural uncanny in the taqueria conversa leaves the viewer lost in time-space compression; the here/elsewhere and then/now are disconcertedly confounded. For some, this uncertainty is an unsettling instance of the psycho-spatial tectonics of urban unlivability in that it has pitched them into a city more heterogeneous than desirable. For others, the uncanny architectural indeterminacy and dizzying impasse of the taqueria conversa are indices of a different sort of unlivability: the increasingly vertiginous social and economic inequality and exclusion that has been the engine driving neoliberal urbanism in Phoenix as elsewhere (Davis and Monk 2007). This contradictory predicament opens potentially different narratives, but also it unexpectedly opens up fresh problems of cultural identity and subjectivity, of the body in space-time, and the future of urbanism itself.

Stymied by reigning anti-immigrant sentiment, Phoenix city residents, planners, and civic leaders have been reluctant to acknowledge—let alone to cultivate—creative, innovative ways that migrants already make their diasporic imprint. How opportune, then, that, taquerias conversas seem to closely embody what Sara Ahmed in her discussion of affect theory calls “conversion points,” linking together objects and affects (2010:38). Not unlike the religious conversos of the US Southwest, conversion points transform objects as if by sleight-of-hand, in the manner of Jews “passing” as Christians, or 24-hour drive-thru taquerias passing as American fast food. Adapting Ahmed’s insights, rather than the nostalgic “happy object” of childhood habits associated with the “taste” of McD, DQ, BK, Phoenicians confront a Mexicanized perversion that for those whose “angle of arrival” is already tilted against immigrants, converts the object from happy to unhappy. For them, a negative affective value associated with immigration “sticks” to the taquerias, and (un)settles as a kind of anxiety about the incremental diasporic conversion of the cityscape; their awareness of the uncanny doubling now embodied in the taquerias potentially makes the taqueria a thing of terror, as captured in the quotation from Freud in the epigraph at the start of this paper (or indeed, in the Trump supporter’s implicit warning against taco terrorism: there will be “taco trucks on every corner”). In this context, the taquerias conversas, I’d like to think, amount to a kind of (un)intentional migrant-driven insurgent urbanism; instantiated into the urban landscape, they are poised at the city’s impasse, at a conversion point in its narrative drama.

The video loops foreground over and over this situational violence, as it were, of the conversion of the optimism associated with American fast food into its unbidden and unexpected occupation, its colonization by once-exotic Mexican street food. But can
the multimodal language of visual urbanism and its photographic ethnographics have the potential to cut through this impasse that blocks many Arizonans from comprehending immigrants’ positive contributions to the city? On the one hand, the loop effect holds this pivotal conversion point in a “state of animated suspension” (Berlant 2011: 5); this impasse here applies most pertinently to urban fast food outposts, but by extension, to the regional and national culture. The city, just as the nation, is clearly changing. But how to tell the story of this destabilizing of former certainties has not yet become clear (or cannot yet be acknowledged)—and its assessment will vary depending on the positioning of the viewing subject. On the other hand, the incessant replay of the video loop poses a question: is this conversion definitive? Is it a fait accompli? Or does the transnational conversion remain caught in suspension, its palpably devastating effects on Anglo nativist dominance fantasies still potentially reversible? For me, the video loops not only display this conundrum; they motivate viewers not to build higher walls of exclusion, but to dislodge the impasse and our incapacity to envision and narrate in a more inclusive manner the next chapter in our collective urban story.

Coda

Make no mistake: the drive-thru and carryout taquerias are not ephemeral, fly-by-night establishments. To take one of the earliest and most prolific instances, Filiberto’s parent company Filimex L.L.C., headquartered in metro Phoenix, proclaims on its corporate website that from its first restaurant founded in 1993 in the city of Mesa in metro Phoenix, its “fast, authentic Mexican food” operation has grown to a dynasty of at least 55 restaurants in three states. True, this commercial prowess pales by comparison to the top fast-food empires that now encircle the globe—but they too had humble beginnings. And much like any dutiful corporate parent, Filimex L.L.C. boasts on its website that it reinvests in the communities it serves, supporting St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital and youth athletics.

Perhaps its evident commercial success made Filiberto’s a ready target of the infamous former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio’s notorious roundups of undocumented immigrants. Even before the Sheriff’s roundups, in 1997 the then-named Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS) made high-profile raids of 15 Filiberto’s locations in metro Phoenix, resulting in the arrest and deportation of over 190 unauthorized workers and what was until that time the largest fine levied in a national worksite enforcement case, nearly $2 million. In a plea bargain the four Latinx brothers who owned Filiberto’s admitted to conspiring to hire illegal immigrants and tax fraud, and were sentenced to thirteen months in prison in 1999. Until that time the INS supposedly had investigated some 600 companies in metro Phoenix, but it brought charges against only Filiberto’s, one of the greatest Hispanic success stories in Arizona business. In a city where virtually every restaurant is a Mexican restaurant by virtue of who is working in the kitchen (the same open secret goes for every car wash, janitorial service, hotel domestic staff, and more), it seems likely that the indictment singling out the chain of taquerias exceeded the “facts of the case.” Despite law enforcement official’s blatant ethnic profiling of a Latinx commercial enterprise, Filiberto’s has continued to flourish—and evidently inspired the many Berto/Beto spinoffs.
The Filiberto’s case was an early instance of what would soon become the state’s most notorious anti-immigrant legislation, the “Safe Neighborhoods, Immigration, and Law Enforcement Act,” better known as Senate Bill 1070. Intended as an “attrition through enforcement” doctrine, the law authorized state and local law enforcement of federal immigration laws, made it a state crime for migrants to be present without authorization documents, penalized anyone who sheltered, hired or transported unauthorized immigrants, and more. The US Supreme Court determined most of the bill to be unconstitutional in 2012 but upheld Arizona law enforcement agencies’ right to investigate immigration status during lawful stops, detentions, or arrests. Other bills ensued, and the verdict is still out, considering the state’s continued Latinx demographic insurgency, on Arizona’s hysterical regulative efforts to hold on to the Juan-Crow political and social segregation that historically favored white supremacy in the state’s public sphere. Recent efforts in 2018 by the state’s more progressive cities to stand their ground as sanctuary cities to welcome immigrants, refugees, and Central American asylees in defiance of federal and state government predilections for tougher enforcement, led to a showdown with the legislature and governor, who drew license to more deeply entrench extremist conservative policies in the aftermath of the election of president Donald Trump. Clearly, battles for the right to the city must be waged on multiple fronts.

Final reflections
Readers are invited to decide for themselves, but to my mind, the video loops that I have provided performatively make visible the dizzying cycle of appearance/disappearance/reappearance of uncanny urban forms. Not only do the micro-movie loops performatively model the affectively bewildering repetition-compulsion of the taquerias’ proliferation across the cityscape; they insist that temporality does something far more complex than move relentlessly forward toward a putative progress historically undergirded by white supremacy. For clearly here, time doubles back on itself, and far-away spaces, unmoored, drift off and disconcertingly re-root.
reterritorializing and defamiliarizing the cityscape so that even those who never left home feel estranged, as if living in exile as the city around them—replete with disturbing architectural doppelgangers—hauntingly converted into something Other. The video loops also provoke deeper, critical comprehension of the culinary/cultural/political challenges posed by the psycho-spatial impact that diasporic Latinx immigrants indelibly have made on city design and its residents’ urban imaginary.

Taquerias conversas themselves are a creative, performative act, transforming everyday urban experiences of immigrants and non-immigrants alike. The looped videos disclose the creative conversion of the city’s iconic architectural forms and dominant design protocols. Rather than the prototypical urban development by “creative destruction,” which Latinx Phoenix has experienced as disinvestment, destruction, displacement, creative conversion (re)invests the urban landscape with bold declarations of transnational migrants’ presence, of their participation and engagement in local economies. Taquerias conversas constitute an assertion of the fundamental value of belonging embodied in their distinctively remade urban forms.

Thanks to the revelatory, transformative power of the image, I contend that not only do the optic antics of my para-cinematic digital video loops enable scholars and city residents alike to visualize—and perhaps to relish (as do I and others whose angle of arrival to the taqueria conversa tilts favorably toward immigrants)—the architectural uncanny that haunts contemporary Phoenix. They also (psycho)analytically enable us to better grasp the challenge of what is at stake in the taquerias’ diasporic contribution to the city’s urbanism. If the taqueria conversa marks a point of affective turn, that point is where familiarity and its habitual relation to affects of happiness and homeliness veer into a new direction provoked by queasy familiarity qua unfamiliarity, which is the uncanny. The taqueria is an architectural point of conversion, perversion, transformation of the everyday familiar, swerving off-kilter to challenge the expectation of a (national) childhood fantasy of happiness and hegemony associated with mid-20th century fast-food icons. As a convert, the taqueria displaces this fantasy; a new affect of queasiness sticks to the urban object of the taqueria and alerts us that another urban story is already unfolding, if we only could find a way to tell it. Taquerias conversas upend the city’s dominant place-making dynamics; the repetition compulsion, the prosthetic irruption of the past into the present, the tear of transnational borders ripping through local spaces and vernacular imaginaries, and the challenge of unintentional, insurgent urbanism-from-below—all conspire to intensify for many Phoenicians the dizzying psycho-spatial affective disorientation that I call urban vertigo. Phoenix boosters’ unsustainable vision of limitless, relentlessly sun-drenched growth and Anglo-supremacist domestic territoriality becomes unfixed; instead the luminous, portentous shadow cast by the taquerias’ insurgent urbanism insistently swerves the city toward a more heterogeneously resilient, if contingent, transnationalized urban future. This inclusive and livable future Phoenix, whose contours take shape in defiance of concerted efforts to hold them back, cultivates what the late esteemed geographer Doreen Massey (1994) quite some time ago called a “global sense of place,” as immigrants and their diasporic avatars remake the urban imaginary of metro Phoenix.
Notes

[1] The inspiration for this experiment using digital social media imaging for ethnographic visualization and interpretation began long before anything called social media existed. As an undergraduate at SUNY Binghamton in the early 1970s I was one of a handful of early members of the Apparition Theater of New York, a 3-D shadow performance company engaged in creating para-cinematic “optic antics” under the extraordinary creative guidance of “underground” filmmaker Ken Jacobs (see Pierson, James, and Arthur, 2011). Our experimental 3-D shadow theater taught me to see what was not there, to grasp the affective intensity and viscerality of an absent presence; its truth. Many years later this early formative influence continues to shape my anthropologist’s gaze.

[2] In his discussion of racial zoning, Richard Rothstein, in his illuminating book The Color of Law (2017), makes clear that urban planners had not merely indulged in benign neglect. After WWI and the onset of the Great Migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans to northern cities (Griffin 1995, Wilkerson 2010), and in the wake of a 1917 US Supreme Court decision to overturn racially explicit zoning ordinances in Buchanan v Warley, prominent city planners and federal officials enthusiastically pursued instead economic zoning laws. The careful governmental regulation of residential, business, and industrial property “could also accomplish racial segregation” (Rothstein 2017: 51). Advocates of the merits of racial and class segregation that could be achieved by economic zoning included the likes of influential planner and landscape architect Fredrick Law Olmstad, Jr. Rothstein pulls no punches to show how the effects of zoning and a host of other de jure regulations by planners and government officials purposefully sustained racial segregation up to and beyond the Civil Rights era, and designed the structural underdevelopment that continues to confront Latinx and other racially minoritized and immigrant communities. Sonia A. Hirt more cautiously tiptoes toward much the same conclusion in her comparative analysis of municipal zoning in Zoned in the USA (2014).

[3] Intriguingly, in 2015, to make reparations for its “historic mistake,” Spain’s Ministry of Justice began offering citizenship to descendants of Jews expelled or forced to flee during the Inquisition from 1402-1498. Applicants need not be practising Jews but must trace their family history back to the Spanish Sephardim. They need not give up their other nationality, but must pass tests in Spanish language, civics and criminal background. The original deadline of three years was extended in March 2018 to October 1, 2019. By March 2018, over 2,400 applicants had obtained Spanish citizenship, among them, New Mexico Hispanos (Krasnow 2016; Romero 2018).

[4] This latter is Mercado de los Cielos, a former Mervyn’s department store at Desert Sky Mall, established in 1981 to serve the white middle-class families who’d snapped up homes in Maryvale, the earliest mass-produced, segregated residential development in Phoenix. Since the 1990s Maryvale has transformed into what is now a heavily Latinx and immigrant-dense neighborhood, and retail marketers have adapted accordingly. Alex Oberle (2004) noted in a study of Latinx commercial landscapes in Phoenix that some Hispanic businesses occupied structures that had been previously other well-known business establishments, such as check cashing outlets that curiously resembled Taco Bell restaurants or gas stations. Unfortunately Oberle doesn’t make anything more of this intriguing phenomenon. A web search reveals blogs and miscellaneous webpages created by others fascinated by the conversos created out of abandoned familiar fast food architectural sites. For example, Peter Hartlaub tracks Taco Bell makeovers in the San Francisco Bay Area (2013). Architect Gregory Marinic tracks with a more scholarly lens the adaptive reuse by Mexican immigrants of obsolete retail mall interiors in suburban Houston. Marinic refreshingly urges designers to “help steward obsolete retail interiors to become unlikely incubators of cultural diversity in suburban America” (2016: 65).

[5] Author Koptiuch was a co-investigator in the research that Kamel (2016) describes.

[6] It matters not for this argument that as Scott Walker notes in Making the Desert Bloom...
nobody inhabited this desert territory when Phoenix was founded in the late 19th C. The indigenous Hohokum had long gone, and early settlement was about 50/50 Anglos and Mexicans. What matters is that Phoenicians know (however vaguely) that this city’s territory was once Mexico’s; the taqueria taps into this conceptual reservoir with a kind of prosthetic reach into the past and reverberates with 21st C anxieties about Mexican immigrants’ de facto Reconquista of the US Southwest. A realist accounting of the empirical past is not entirely pertinent; it is the historical sense of contingency of the present that is at stake. 

[7] It must be said, too, that taquerias ought not be over-idealized. Arizona taqueria entrepreneurs pursue the same low-wage, exploitative strategies used by iconic fast-food enterprises. In 2015, the union-led national “Fight for $15” campaign lobbying for $15/hour minimum wage organized metro Phoenix fast-food workers to protest alongside grocery clerks, childcare and home healthcare workers, and college instructors. See Stuart 2015. In November 2016, Arizonans voted to raise the minimum wage from $8.05/hour to $10 in 2017 and $12 in 2020. Business groups quickly filed litigation to overturn the Proposition, and though this challenge was rejected by the Arizona Supreme Court, opponents are likely to continue efforts to disregard the will of the voters to raise the state minimum wage. 

[8] It is noteworthy that SB 1070 was passed in 2010, well after the 2007 peak year for both authorized and unauthorized immigration from Mexico. Also, the Arizona legislature’s 2010 ban on teaching Mexican American history and culture in majority-Latinx public high schools of nearby-city Tucson gave the lie to claims that its chief immigration concern was illegality; clearly ethnicity, race, even perceived demographic threat animated this odious ban, as if acquisition of culturally relevant knowledge in and of itself renders Latinx youth seditious. To wit, on August 22, 2017, a US District Court judge ruled that Arizona’s ethnic studies ban is unconstitutional because it had been enacted for racial and political reasons. See Phippin 2015, Kiefer 2017. 

[9] In a somewhat different vein, Camilo José Vergara’s (2000) visual documentation of Mexican immigrant storefronts and streetscapes in South Central Los Angeles captured evocatively the dynamics of temporal change-in-place through his photographs of a succession of historical moments at the same location. Anthropologist Susan A. Phillips’s (2001) assessment of the controversial response to Vergara’s exhibit in Los Angeles lends a mindful cautionary note for critical visualization. 

[10] Elaborating on a key dimension of contingency in the city’s future in his locally-controversial book on urban sustainability in Phoenix, Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World’s Least Sustainable City (2013), Andrew Ross named Arizona’s bitter battle over immigration as the city’s “first skirmish in the climate wars of the future” (p. 211). Ross regards the humane integration of vulnerable immigrants as one of the greatest sustainability challenges faced by metro Phoenix. See also my commentary on Ross’s book, Koptiuch (2012).

References


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