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BAGELS AND GENRES

BY JONATHAN SADOW

Conversations about bagels have something to teach us about the nature of genres and the study of material culture. I realized this a few years ago as I was sitting in an Einstein's Bagels in Las Vegas that was decorated with standardized murals imitating 1930s Bauhaus design. I remembered a conversation with a friend a decade earlier about the authenticity of modern-day bagels—or lack thereof. But as I glanced at the “traditional” preparation with lox and capers alongside the sun-dried tomato variants, it occurred to me that it might be a false competition. Both “official” bagel forms and their variants—bagel types and bagel versions, as folklorists would have it—were part of the same process of representing and creating a tradition.

What do I mean by this? Many debates about authenticity boil down to the exclusion and inclusion of objects related to a category: poppyseed is genuine, blueberry is not. I would like to suggest that these discussions suffer from a basic category error. Attempting to understand an object through classification—as an example of the genre “bagel,” in this case—is both necessary and misleading. What makes something a bagel? One might ask the same question of lasagnas, Panama hats, duck decoys, folk songs, novels, longhouses, bebop, or romantic comedies. Charlotte Smith, breaking a few rules, introduced her 1784 *Elegiac Sonnets* with the preface, “The little poems which are here called Sonnets have, I believe, no very just claim to that title” (1993, 3). Although her violations of the sonnet genre wouldn't even be noticed by a modern reader, her anxiety over the production of a

“true” sonnet is telling. Part of understanding a genre, especially a genre one has strong feelings about, involves thinking about it as a taxonomic class or collection of observable traits. “Real” and “fake” versions of a genre always come into play. In order to describe a genre, one must provide examples that fall within that genre—and also those objects that lie outside it. But, I would like to argue, the feelings are ultimately as important as the traits. “Genre” is a subject that represents cultural discussions about objects, not objects in themselves. A bagel is not a “real” bagel because of any of its physical features.

Before you become upset, it is worth noting that folklorists have a rich vocabulary for describing these kinds of cultural discussions. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin pointed out a long time ago that tradition may or may not refer to the past, but the creation of tradition is a constant part of cultural practice:

The origin of cultural practices is largely irrelevant to the experience of tradition; authenticity is always defined in the present. . . . The prevailing concept of tradition, both in common sense and social theory, has envisioned an isolable body or core of unchanging traits handed down from the past. Tradition is likened to a natural object, occupying space, enduring in time. (1984, 286)

In other words, an “authentic tradition” is something quite different than historical fact, but nevertheless insists on *being* historical fact. Even if the tradition is objectively a recent development, it insists that it is not. Practitioners of a particular tradition may or

may not be aware of this paradox; Handler and Linnekin found that they often were. Whether they were or were not aware of this possibility, however, tradition demands an insistence on “unchanging traits handed down from the past.” Those supposedly unchanging features then require a set of rules in order to maintain them, and rules are what genre is all about—whether in music, religious practice, or bagels. Maintaining these rules means guarding the true form of a genre from fake, modern, nostalgic reenactments like the murals at Einstein's.

Nevertheless, this problem lands us in some murky territory, since nostalgia is everywhere—including in the works of scholars and historians. One might think that murals at Einstein's Bagels are the enactment of nostalgia, whereas tracing the history of disputes between union and nonunion bakeries in 1940s Brooklyn might presumably be a form of scholarship. Clarifying the role nostalgia plays in scholarship is complex, however, since nostalgia often fuels folklore collection work. A parody of this phenomenon, Calvin Trillin's investigation of bagels' history in his essay “The Magic Bagel” was motivated by his desire to discover the lost bagels of the past and his contempt for California bagels. His daughter is a “real” New Yorker because

she knew the difference between those bagel-shaped objects available in American supermarkets and the authentic New York item that had been hand-rolled and boiled in a vat and then carefully baked by a member in good standing of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union. (2000, 51)



Wood-fired oven at Fairmount Bagel Bakery, Montreal, January 2011. Photo: Jonathan Sadow

Unlike some scholars, Trillin is straightforward about his own motivations. He is attempting to manipulate his daughter into moving back to New York by bribing her with the bagels of her childhood. California, of course, represents a form of inauthentic novelty contrasted with the authenticity of New York. Trillin attempts to figure out the story of the lost bagel of his youth:

There was a sharp split between bagel bakeries and bread bakeries. The bagel bakers had their own local, No. 338. They didn't bake bread, and bread bakers didn't make bagels. Originally, of course, bagels were made only with white flour. But some bread bakers who trafficked in pumpernickel would twist some bread dough into bagel shapes and bake them. By not going through the intermediate boiling that is part of the process of making an authentic

bagel, they stayed out of another local's jurisdiction. (2000, 53)

He discovers that the lost bagel of his childhood was not, technically speaking, a bagel at all, since it was from one of those pumpernickel bread bakers that made them in order to evade union rules. To his chagrin, his own ethnic sensibility clashed with the official definition of the genre—in this case, a definition that was both legal and formal.

There is an entire academic language for these kinds of formal distinctions. The “etic” or outsider genre terms folklorists use are “type and version.” The general-to-specific hierarchy runs genre, subgenre, type, variant or subtype, then version. Einstein's poppyseed and blueberry bagels are both versions: single “performances” of a type of bagel might fall under the subcat-

egory “Gentile bagel” or “Jewish bagel,” but they belong to the genre “bagel.” The bagel might actually be a subgenre under a larger umbrella that takes in the bagel and doughnut. Bread things with holes in middle are the basic structure; sugary or not sugary could be subgeneric again, while blueberry versus poppyseed is a more idiosyncratic variation at the level of type or variant.

Consumers of bagels, however, have their own “emic,” or insider genre rules. Most insist that “real” bagels have a distinct form. Eben Sorkin told me that “a real bagel is boiled, has a certain texture, and also a differentiation in texture between the crust and the center. Fake bagels are homogeneous in texture. The fake ones bother me for cultural and culinary reasons, and also out of compassion—no one should have to eat one” (2010). Sean Murray claims that

“incorporating too many non-bread foods (such as seeds or dried herbs) in a single bagel, or even a single non-bread food such as blueberries, raisins, or cheese, is verboten” (2010).

Trillin’s quest, while not an academic venture, highlights the complicated interchange between research and nostalgia and between etic and emic genres. While many Jews assume that “authentic” bagels may be traced back to Eastern European *shtetls*, Trillin discovers—or at least believes—that this is an invented tradition, since bagels

seem to descend from rather arbitrary union disputes of the fairly recent past. However, Trillin’s point was not that the bagels of his youth were “fake,” even if they technically weren’t bagels. Rather, he concludes that “real” bagels are whatever New York Jews *say* are real bagels.

Further attempts to examine the genre of the bagel reveal something quite different than the specifics of its material form. It is precisely the existence of “fake” bagels that produces such strong feelings about the “real” ones. Alice Lichtenstein’s at-

titude is typical: “I remember the first time I encountered a fake bagel—Thomas’s or Lender’s?—in Iowa. I couldn’t believe the *goyim* actually thought they were eating a bagel! White bread shaped as a doughnut” (2010). That is, an important feature of bagels is their Jewishness. Part of the outrage has to do with the object itself, but some of the annoyance comes from the fact that Iowans had appropriated and altered an object that belonged to New York Jews.

But what are those objects? Einstein’s Bagels is, needless to say, judged by



Saint Viateur Bagel Café on Avenue du Mont-Royal, Montreal, January 2011. Photo: Jonathan Sadow

everyone to be a theme-park model of the Jewish culture of the past, an inauthentic corporate caricature. Pumpernickel bagels, on the other hand, are almost always placed in the “authentic” category, despite Trillin’s demonstration that they originated as illicit non-bagel novelties.

Bagels are a genre in distress, but it is primarily the distressed nature of a traditional genre that establishes something as a genre in the first place. In other words, the concern for bagels’ “traditional” form only became important when cultural assimilation became objectionable rather than desired. The corporate revival of the “traditional” bagel is achieved by an appropriation of ethnic nostalgia, but once this nostalgia is appropriated, it is deemed to be “inauthentic” and must be distinguished from “genuine” ethnic identity. In other words, ethnic identity is partially created by mourning, reviving, reinventing, or reimagining a tradition—and then by decrying the results once they have been appropriated by mass culture. This, in turn, leads to a quest for the “true” lost tradition of the past. Benjamin Balthaser, a Californian, writes:

My first or second time in the Jewish promised land, Brooklyn, I ate the best bagel I’ve ever eaten on the last day of my visit. The shop was owned and run by what seemed like a small army of Hassidic men in homburgs and shirt sleeves, and on a hunch, I bought two dozen and tore through half the first bag before I’d even made it to Connecticut. I can remember exactly what made them so delicious—there was the soft, almost moist, consistency of the boiled dough, the poppy seeds baked into the skin, the way they seemed to almost have a burnt shell around them and this soft, earthy inside—like some kind of shtetl stink, some earthbound memory of pogroms and bald women and cabbage. The memory is perfectly clear: the aftertaste of the dough, the sick compulsive full feeling of six bagels on a Peter Pan bus on the 91. Every time I go back to Brooklyn, I wander around looking for this mythic bagel shop. I’ve walked every street of Crown Heights; I’ve made the rounds in Park Slope; I’ve cased Fort Green

and still can’t find this shop anywhere. I’m starting to think I may have imagined it, that it was some fantasy born out of my West Coast anxiety around and desire for authenticity, to taste it, to be able to swallow the meaning of Jewishness and feel it expand in my stomach and then get sick with it and want to puke. (2010)

As Balthaser’s description makes clear, the desire for a mythic object of the past—and hence, perhaps, a resolution to one’s own identity conflicts—is often rather vexed. This desire is centered on the belief that the important feature of the sought-after object is not only its physical characteristics, but its origin—in Brooklyn.

Several hours north, however, Montreal Jews strongly disagree. Canadian Jews claim that Montreal bagels are the only “real” bagels and insist that New York variants are entirely inauthentic. Montreal bagels are smaller and sweeter than New York bagels and baked in a special wood-burning bagel oven. Traditionally, they come only in poppy and sesame varieties, known as “black” and “white” bagels. Montreal is dominated by two bagel bakeries—Fairmount and Saint Viateur—each claiming that its recipe was brought over by the Eastern European founders.

Montrealers’ disdain for the New York bagel is absolutely universal. April Ford says that Montreal bagels are “small and dainty, the size that bagels should be. Those big puffy bagels are just like eating bread” (2010). Catherine Cuttler, a Canadian expatriate, says:

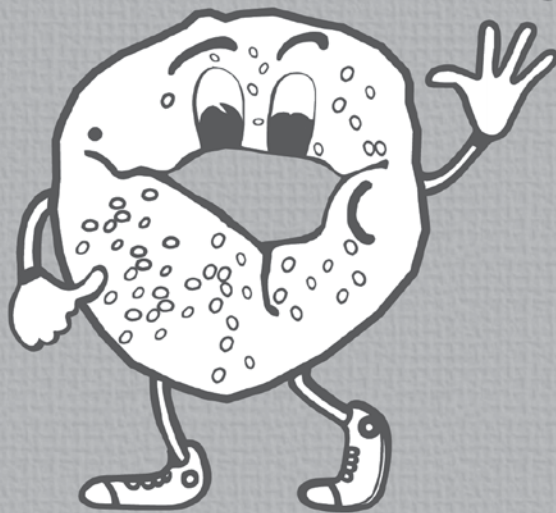
I only eat Montreal bagels and shun all others. I will never eat a Zeppy or an Iggy bagel, even if it is a sesame or poppy variety. The idea of a whole wheat bagel makes me shudder. When I see my grandchildren eating a chocolate chip bagel, I wonder what will become of them. I know that there are bagels other than sesame and poppy that exist in Montreal now, but they, too, are not real bagels. Am I being too nationalistic or too inflexible? I don’t think so. (2010)

Although baking methods are important, the element that makes something a “real” bagel is that it is produced in New York or Montreal, presumably by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. As it turns out, local identity tends to trump both formal and ethnic characteristics.

In other words, arguments about bagels are what bagel genres are all about. “Authentic” bagels may or may not actually refer to the past or conform to the genre; the thing that makes them traditional is that they are objects of discussion by and importance to people who eat them. One might notice also that the distinction between emic and etic genres is blurred: the necessity that a bagel be boiled in order to *be* a bagel is an “academic” as well as a legal distinction. However, the insistence upon this academic distinction is the ethnic characteristic from which the entire argument emanates. Union rules and academic distinctions are important not because they distinguish between true and false bagels, but because the discussion of those rules is part of ethnic identity. In other words, it is the nostalgia for a lost piece of the past that creates the “rules” for the genre. If bagels are not under attack by an egregious inauthenticity, they lose their identity as a distinct genre with an ethnic or national identity and must be consigned to the genre of “bread things with holes in the middle.” This opposition, of course, only exists inasmuch as it is part of the self-conscious ethnic identity of the practitioner.

Interestingly, category rules are also part of the generation of the physical object: Union rules and academic distinctions create the rhetoric that defines true and false bagels, but they also work like a recipe. People follow the recipe; create the traditional item, with or without worrying about whether it is legitimate; and experience, consume, and remember the item as being real or fake, with or without considering it to be part of their cultural identity. After all, people eat bagels. Gentiles and Jews eat bagels, and by eating bagels, they are also not eating bread. And they may know this or not know this, and may or may not care.

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Bagel and *schmear*: sesame seed bagel. Montreal, January 2011. Photo: April Ford

Of course, the recipe may or may not be followed; the generic distinction only rears its ugly head when rules are perceived to have been broken. This nostalgia is often accompanied by its own form of self-consciousness—the recognition that the desire for the past is unattainable—and quite self-aware of its own falsehood. The belief in the “real” object is often accompanied by a sense of its loss. One may understand that one’s own tradition is not the same as historical fact, and at the same time be chagrined to no longer follow it. Catherine Cuttler’s son, Joshua Hasenberg, sheepishly admits:

I was bothered by fake bagels for a long time (although I always loved cinnamon raisin). I now allow my children to order chocolate chip bagels and put whitefish salad on them. Also, I’m more than willing to eat something *traife* on a bagel. Like a whole lobster. (2010)

And Nicole Hasenberg, Joshua’s spouse, confesses, “It is a complete outrage to Josh and me that we purchase chocolate chip. Recently, Noah’s had mango bagels, which our son of course wanted me to purchase” (2010). My own two decade-old conver-

sation with Tracey Levy about blueberry bagels is a good example of this form of chagrined self-awareness. This entire article could perhaps be seen a form of nostalgia, self-parody, and identity caricature. Although I am a “real” scholar, I am also simply another Jew arguing about bagels.

Many connoisseurs of bagels are quite aware of these paradoxes. For example, they insist on the tradition’s connection to their own identity, even while admitting that gentiles can produce a more authentic bagel. Saint Viateur bagels in Montreal is currently owned by Italian Robert Morena, and one primarily encounters Catholic Francophones working in Saint Viateur shops. The acknowledgment that bagels need not be made by Jews to be authentic is often a troublesome one. Benjamin Balthaser remarks:

My mom always says the best bagel-shop bagel ever made in San Luis Obispo was by a Vietnamese baker, but she also does always mention that it came from “that Vietnamese” bagel maker. That is, while she acknowledges that one doesn’t need to be a Jew to make a good bagel, it’s never quite a natural experience for her, either. (2010)

This kind of observation is shared by many. Cecilia Walsh-Russo writes:

Absolute Bagels is owned and operated by a Thai immigrant worker and his extended family. He worked and apprenticed at Esso Bagels in midtown before opening up his shop on Broadway and 108th Street. So “authenticity” in terms of who’s doing the baking was definitely something I pondered whenever I’d hear my order for a bagel with cream cheese translated into Thai for the family of workers behind the counter.

Nevertheless, Walsh-Russo maintains that Absolute bagels are, in fact, absolute. Moreover, eating an even more authentic Absolute mini-bagel brings her back to a more authentic, more “ethnic” time.

Bagel size was also something I noticed at Absolute, because the regular bagels are HUGE—fleshy and overwhelming in terms of their girth. But Absolute sold what was termed “mini-bagels” as an alternative. Mini-bagels are actually, it turns out, the size of bagels from the nineteenth century—the original (as in possibly truly “authentic”) bagel size now characterized for twenty-first century portion mongers as “mini.” In case you’re wondering, I was a huge fan of the mini because it was always like biting into something as it “truly” was, back in time. Plus the “mini” helped me not feel like a complete glutton for eating whitefish AND a bagel. (2010)

Montrealers might feel vindicated by this view. Similarly, Alice Lichtenstein’s husband, Jim Bercovitz, observes:

I grew up by the Bagel Oasis in Queens; they still exist, but they are not the same as they used to be. I’m a New Yorker, but I really only like Montreal bagels now. They’re different from New York bagels, since the important part of the recipe is the wood-burning oven—they’re more like cousins. Montreal bagels are strong. Montreal bagels have a sweetness—they have a different texture, different flavor. But I don’t care where the bagel is from; if there was an Iowa City bagel that was good, I’d eat it. (2010)

Nostalgic insider conversations about true and false traditions tend to become self-conscious. The arcane “truth” about “real” and “fake” bagels becomes a kind of joke precisely because it has become an academic—that is, a meaningless—distinction. One might become chagrined to realize that one’s own quest for authentic bagels is a fraud, but still insist on it anyway.

Of course, even if one were to revive the authentic bagel of the past, it would not recreate the past. Moreover, the recreation of the past isn’t really the point: that is why people are willing to eliminate ideologically inconvenient or formal distinctions while still holding their ground. The real goal of the genre argument is to employ nostalgia for the past in order to influence the present. Tracey Levy explains:

I get that bagels became a mainstream food, as well as an ethnic food. For those of us for whom bagels were a cultural food, I felt like we had to stand up for real bagels. It registers that my sister eats blueberry. Anyone I know who is Jewish who eats a fake bagel—it registers. I have a reaction. They are not only being assimilated, they are being assimilated with a really unappealing product! That really bothers me. (2004)

Traditional genre rules are perhaps best seen as a kind of enforcement. This enforcement is not so much about objects themselves, but rather an enforcement of ethnicity, place, nation. As Richard Bauman notes, “Prescriptive insistence on strict generic regimentation works conservatively in the service of established authority and order” (2004, 8). And yet, the “academic” distinction—the etic genre—is in some sense important, too, not because it is “correct,” but because the argument between tradition and novelty is an integral part of ethnic identity.

As I sat in that Einstein’s Bagels—incidentally, only a few miles away from the New York–New York Hotel and Casino, where butcher shops and manhole covers were recreated as a Las Vegas Strip tourist attraction—I stared at a square Asiago cheese bagel and realized that it was perfectly recognizable as a bagel, despite con-

forming to no formal rules of the genre. But, as Jacques Derrida might say, genre is an inescapable form of legal enforcement that is always violated. If there were no rule breakers, there would be no rules to insist upon. Witness Tracey Levy’s response to her sister Sara Vogelhut’s confession that she liked blueberry bagels: “And you call yourself a Jew?” ▼

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