TACOS, GUMBO, AND WORK:

THE POLITICS OF FOOD AND THE VALORIZATION OF LABOR

ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE TENTH DAY OF APRIL 2017

TO THE STONE CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE

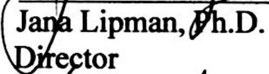
OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

Sarah Fouts

APPROVED:



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Abstract

Research into the narrative and interpretation of how undocumented food vendors navigate formal systems raises questions about the relationship between labor, entrepreneurship, migration, and regulation. From taco truck owners to restaurateurs, Latinx food vendors are emblematic of the New Orleans post-Katrina recovery, initially feeding workers who were fundamental in rebuilding the devastated region. Despite the important role they continue to fill and their growing popularity among the non-Latinx community, these foodways purveyors face challenges in accessing political and cultural legitimacy. Using a multi-sited ethnographic framework this research follows workers from Honduras to New Orleans to analyze how these individuals negotiate social policies and precarious economies. Building on accompaniment methodology this study employs community-engaged research to get a more holistic analysis of these migration experiences and adds to the growing field of cultural producer-oriented scholarship. Centering on the shifts in policy and inconsistencies of legislation I argue that the regulation of food vendors maps onto the criminalization of undocumented individuals. Yet despite these vulnerabilities, these narratives demonstrate how Latinx communities are able to forge their own cultural, economic, and political spaces.

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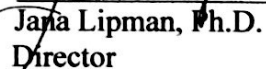
APPROVED: 

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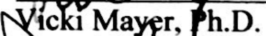

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Chapter One

Introduction: Tacos and Gumbo

Three days a week for almost two years, I picked Luis up at 8:30 am to make the morning rounds to the different *esquinas*, or day laborer corners where men congregate near hardware stores in search for jobs. Each trip, around 11 a.m., we would both start to get hungry; if you were near an *esquina*, it also meant you were never far from food. One day, as we passed by a taqueria, Luis suggested we get *baleadas*. "They have the best ones," he advised, pointing to the blue and white *lonchera* (taco truck or trailer) on the side of the busy road in front of a hardware store. Until I moved to New Orleans I had never heard of a *baleada*—a Honduran flour tortilla with beans, cheese, egg, and meat folded into the thick, soft shell. I looped around, parking behind the walk-up window of the *lonchera*. We each ordered a *baleada* for three dollars a piece and continued our morning routine.

Originally from Honduras, Luis served as an organizer from 2008 to 2012 with the Congress of Day Laborers, a member-led community organization established in December 2006 to fight for the rights of workers and against exploitation by contractors, police, and immigration authorities in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Luis helped launch the Congress of Day Laborers, first as a member—a day laborer—and then as an

organizer, after a trailer landed on his right hand at a work-site accident. He was compensated financially for the damage, but was permanently disabled and shifted his work from manual labor to organizing. At the *esquinas*, Luis, a small-statured man with spikey gelled hair, spoke with the day laborers, keeping them updated on immigration policies, informing them about events for the Latinx community, collecting fees to pay for upkeep of the *esquinas*, and offering consultations for pending traffic tickets or immigration court dates.

When I began volunteering with the Congress of Laborers in 2011, the organizers assigned me the task of driving Luis to the *esquinas* to access those hard-to-reach sites; New Orleans' inefficient public transit system and Luis' undocumented status limited his transportation options to get to the *esquinas* on his own. Driving Luis taught me quickly that each esquina has its own unique charm, characters, and systems. Contractors looking for temporary workers pass through the crew of men, negotiating wages and settling on crews. At some *esquinas* men sit in the shade of live oak trees on the sidewalks as they await job prospects. At other *esquinas*, day laborers have picnic tables and tents to designate their space.

Likewise, each esquina has its own food options, ranging from pop-up vendors with ready-made Styrofoam-packed meals distributed from the trunk of the car, to *loncheras* and brick and mortar establishments, strategically situated near these highly trafficked *esquinas*. Luis knew the ins and outs of these food establishments—where to get the best tacos, *baleadas*, *pollo con tajadas*, *gorditas*. Sometimes we ventured beyond the *esquinas,* to the backs of gas stations and corner stores, where *señoras* set up *pupuserias* to accommodate the growing numbers of Central Americans in New Orleans.

I quickly learned that the relationships between the *esquinas*, the day laborers, and the food vendors, all amount to their own mini-economies—small-scale and hidden though they might seem, they operate as microcosms of a greater dynamic in the city of New Orleans.

Early on in my work, Luis cautioned me to stay in the car at the *esquinas* while he met with the all-male laborers. "It takes time for them to gain your trust," he explained during one of the initial visits. Recognizing my positionality, as a white woman in her early thirties with a Kentucky-twanged Spanish and legal immigration status, I complied, staying in the car and observing as Luis interacted with the workers. After less than a month, I left the confines of my Nissan, as I gained some degrees of trust with the day laborers, helping Luis as needed. My chauffeuring skills eventually graduated to accompanying day laborers to their court visits to help them navigate the labyrinth of the legal system, but I maintained the thrice weekly trips to the *esquinas,* until Luis returned to Honduras in November 2012 to take over his family's coffee farm. I continued working with the Congress of Day Laborers in varying capacities, but the time with Luis left a lasting impact, introducing me to the nuances of Latinx foodways in New Orleans—somehow both visible and invisible— occupying space across the city.

Since 2005, thousands of Central American and Mexican workers arrived in post-Katrina New Orleans to help rebuild, more than doubling the Latinx population in the metropolitan area. At the same time, many Latinx food vendors arrived to the city, recognizing the opportunity to earn money by feeding these construction workers. From dishwashers and tamale vendors to taco truck owners and restaurateurs, Latinx food vendors are emblematic of the New Orleans post-Katrina recovery. Located throughout

the city, these vendors provide migrants with familiar and sustaining foods and offer new dishes for the established community, reshaping tastes and expressions of local cuisine.

Despite limited visibility and mobility due to documentation-based vulnerabilities for many vendors, they continue to fill an important role, having settled in the city as taxpayers, parents, culture bearers, and community leaders. Using an ethnographic framework based in Honduras and New Orleans, I explore the transnational narratives of undocumented Latinx food vendors that live and work in the Crescent City. Despite their similar backgrounds and livelihoods—migrating from the Americas and working in the food industry—each story offers its own unique lens into the challenges these individuals encounter.

Food Studies scholars like Jeffrey Pilcher, Warren Belasco, and Donna Gabaccia have been writing about food in a way that focuses on globalization, marketing, access, and identity through a consumer-oriented framework, giving minimal attention to labor and the political economy.[1] Responding to this shortcoming, Krishnendu Ray's book, *The Ethnic Restaurateur,* shifts the focus of food studies to a producer-oriented lens arguing, "In the consumer-oriented scholarship, all the work of food-related identity is done by the consumers and the commentators, and none whatsoever by the producer of food."[2] While Ray's ethnographic work centers on the experiences of restaurant owners to examine the construction of taste and to debate the usefulness of terms like ethnic, his analysis on labor and the service industry economy is limited.

For Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz labor and the service industry are at the core of her anthropological research. Gomberg-Muñoz's ethnographic study on back of the kitchen workers in Chicago provides rich description of the networks created by a group of undocumented Mexican restaurant workers. She confronts salient immigration debates and draws in the challenges faced by these service industry workers to show how they forge identity in spite of their vulnerable status. Yet as Gomberg-Muñoz centers her work more on the impacts of exclusionary immigration policy and identity constructions of service industry workers, she is less focused on cultural production, leaving out an analysis of the entrepreneurship and cultural agency of undocumented Latinx food producers.[3] Like Gomberg-Muñoz's work, Saru Jayaraman's research explores the working conditions—wages, treatment, and discrimination—in the restaurant industry. Jayaraman's research is framed through her own activist work with the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) and provides useful mix methods approach to analyze labor and the political economy in the restaurant industry. While her argument and recommendations provide a useful framework to understand the relationship between food and labor, her study is isolated to just workers in the formal sector.[4]

On the flipside, Labor Studies scholars that focus their research on food tend to concentrate on either agricultural or the industrial sector, leaving out food producers in the formal and informal sector.[5] For example Margaret Gray's research on the working conditions of undocumented farmworkers in the Hudson Valley situates labor at the center in questioning the ethics of these food economies. Leon Fink's work on Guatemalan workers in the poultry industry provides a lens into transnational processes and the mobilization of these workers that are able to employ organizing skills learned in

their Mayan communities to union organizing in a poultry factory in North Carolina. Drawing from the theoretical and methodological framework of these food and labor scholars, this research brings the analysis from the fields and the factories to the kitchen.

Adding a labor analysis to Food Studies shifts the scope beyond just identity and taste in order to better understand the integration processes of these migrant communities as they contend for political, economic, and cultural legitimacy. In this way, this research adheres to Krishnendu Ray's call for a more producer-oriented approach to Food Studies by combining this area with Labor Studies and placing work at the center of food production and culture. Operating at the intersection of these fields allows for a more holistic examination of the processes of cultural production as it relates to the worker and the labor that goes into making these foods.

Likewise, tying in immigration policy helps to contextualize the challenges these workers face legitimizing their existence and illustrates the global structures that force these individuals to migrate to the United States. Using a transnational framework opens the focus to consider how labor and immigration policies intersect with cultural production, government regulations, and enforcement. Broadening the scope as such illustrates how shifts in and resistance to legislation can shape the cultural and economic integration of the Latinx population. Exploring the experiences of these food industry workers in navigating systems and policies, I argue that the regulation of Latinx food vendors maps onto the criminalization of undocumented individuals. I demonstrate how political developments in post-Katrina New Orleans led to the marginalization and vilification of these undocumented communities. Yet despite this vulnerability, and in

part by taking advantage of the very economic system that ostracizes them, these communities are able to forge their own cultural, economic, and political spaces.

While this research is geographically specific to New Orleans, Honduras, and, to some degree, Mexico, none of these stories are isolated to this region. Rather, New Orleans and Honduras, in many ways, serve as a harbinger of what may come in regards to social policy planning and the future of urban development as we continue to tailor government policies to corporate interests that favor the private sector and disregard the realities of working class communities.[6] Focusing on Latinx undocumented communities from Honduras and Mexico provides a transnational lens into global policies that foster the continuous displacement of these communities that migrate to the United States because of failures in their own nations, which are oftentimes sustained by U.S. policies and/or U.S. consumption. While this research is centered on New Orleans, the major themes can be applied on a global scale to understand how communities navigate and resist forces of privatization and deregulation.

Latin America and New Orleans: Gulf and Caribbean Connections

Much of the longstanding relationship between New Orleans and Latin America has been valued in financial terms—from the slave trade, to sugar, to bananas, to oil.[7] Historically, this link has vacillated between state interests, corporate interests, or both, using the Port of New Orleans as an entry point for exchange. Steady flows of migrants, too, have made these transnational journeys from Honduras to New Orleans since the city's founding in the early eighteenth century. While it is easy to romanticize the cultural links between New Orleans and Latin America—carnival, colonial history, music, food, urban design—this relationship must also be examined more deeply. Doing so allows for

a better understanding of the shifting policies, economies, and perceptions that have led up to the contemporary context of Latinx migration in New Orleans.

From 1808-1810, New Orleans housed the earliest Spanish-language newspaper published in the United States, *El Misisipi,* a semiweekly periodical produced to help galvanize Latin American independence movements from U.S. shores.[8] Nineteenth century figures like Mexican politician, Benito Juarez, and Cuban revolutionary, José Martí, spent time in exile in New Orleans. Juarez, fleeing Mexico during the Santa Ana dictatorship, lived in the Treme and earned money by rolling cigars in a Cuban factory before he returned to Mexico, becoming its president in 1858.[9] Martí journeyed between Tampa and New Orleans plotting strategies for Cuban independence from Spain in the 1890s. In the early 1900s, former Honduran president Manuel Bonilla roamed around the French Quarter in exile, until he was recruited by a young Samuel Zemurray to lead a 1911 coup in Honduras to reclaim the presidency, helping to forge the early stages of the United Fruit Company's control in that country.[10]

Around the same time, instability from the Mexican Revolution (1910 to 1917) led to an influx of Mexicans fleeing to the United States. Many of these Mexican emigrants entered the city via ship at the Port of New Orleans from coastal cities like Veracruz and Tampico.[11] Julie Weise contends that during the Mexican Revolution more middle and upper-class Mexicans who opposed the revolution fled to the Crescent City, thus "making New Orleans a stronghold of conservative sentiment during the 1910s."[12] Their ability to pay for maritime entry via ships like Honduran banana boats set them within "a context of international trade rather than violent racial threat."[13]

Trade between New Orleans and its Latin American neighbors flourished during the first half of the twentieth century, with business leaders branding New Orleans as “the Gateway to the Americas.”[14] In 1957, New Orleans Mayor Chep Morrison, a major proponent of trade with Latin America, commissioned the construction of the Garden to the Americas—a row of statues dedicated to Latin American leaders like Francisco

Figure 2: Latinx community members at the base of former Honduran President Francisco Morazán at the Garden to the Americas in 2015. Photo taken by Sarah Fouts.

Morazán, Benito Juarez, and Simon Bolivar—as part of a beautification project recognizing the commercial ties between New Orleans and the Americas. According to Weise, the upper-class acceptance of Latin Americans and the unique racial dynamic in New Orleans granted them more mobility and access than in other cities across the

United States.[15] But, unlike other cities, Weise points out, New Orleans lacked a visible enclave demarcating a clear-cut Mexican or Latin American community.[16] Using census data during the 1920s and 1930s, Weise shows that no block was majority Latin American, arguing that this mobility enabled individuals to live throughout the city, fostering a more seamless integration into the urban social fabric.

But, during the latter half of the twentieth century, Mexican migration to New Orleans abated. The city, instead, increasingly drew in Hondurans through the trading channels from the banana and coffee growing region. United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit (which became Chiquita and Dole) established their respective headquarters in New Orleans, paving the way for businessmen and their families to settle in New Orleans from Honduras. The *Transportes Aereos de Centro America* (TACA) Airlines, established in 1952, made New Orleans accessible by more than just ship.[17] Increased political unrest—the General Strike of 1956 and the military coup of Ramon Villeda Morales in 1963—saw the arrival of even more Hondurans in New Orleans.

By 1970 Hondurans comprised "the largest national origin of immigrants" in Louisiana claiming 12.8% of the state's "foreign born" population.[18] These continued waves of Hondurans arriving in New Orleans between 1950s and 1970s led to the establishment of "El Barrio Lempira," a middle class Honduran neighborhood located near the banana wharfs in the Lower Garden District.[19] Unlike the Mexican community from 1910s to 1940s, Hondurans established their own enclave community with restaurants, corner stores, and a movie cinema—the Happy Hour Theatre (which featured Spanish-language films)—scattered throughout the Uptown neighborhood.[20]

By the latter half of the twentieth century, Mayor Chep Morrison's original dreams of strong and sustained trading ties between New Orleans and Latin America faded as New Orleans' economy shifted from producing goods to services. New Orleans lost out to ports in Houston and Miami, weakening the trade economy there. Shifts in immigration policy and the arrival of more working class immigrants altered the perception of Central American and Mexicans arriving to the city.[21] Compounded with white flight in the 1970s, New Orleans' overall population shrunk, dropping from thirteenth to thirty-fifth in the United States.[22] Many of the Hondurans vacated "El Barrio Lempira" for the newly developed suburbs built on top of a swamp in Jefferson Parish.[23]

Immigration policy played a key role in this integration. On a national level, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 redefined immigration in the United States, emphasizing familial unification and setting a quota on nations in the Western Hemisphere for the first time. The seemingly liberal act imposed a cap of 120,000 Latin Americans into the United States annually.[24] Prior to 1965, an unlimited number of Latin Americans could enter the United States if they paid a head tax prior to entry.[25] Though these migrants could enter the United States with relative ease, they were still subject to deportation and faced extensive inspection at the border.[26] Scholars like Mae Ngai argue that the Hart Celler Act along with the end of the Bracero Guestworker Program (1942-1964) led to the construction of the "illegal immigrant," suggesting that entry restrictions into the United States from south of the border along with ex-Bracero workers returning to the country to fill vacated jobs, prompted patterns of illegal entry into the United States.[27]

Like other immigration policy antecedents (Johnson Reed of 1924 and McCarren-Walter of 1952), the Hart Celler Act of 1965 defined and redefined what constitutes a

desirable immigrant. For example, Cubans, granted blanket amnesty fleeing the Castro regime, arrived in New Orleans in high numbers under the Cuban Readjustment Act of 1966. But for Central Americans and Mexicans, especially those without existing familial ties to the United States, migration to the city became more restricted. Leo Chavez calls this phenomenon the "Latino Threat Narrative." He argues that unintended consequences of the Hart Celler Act helped generate a negative perception towards the Latinx population.[28]

For New Orleans, the neoliberal restructuring of the broader political economy in the latter half of the twentieth century—from union protected, middle class jobs in the oil and port industries to low-wage service industry jobs—helped set the stage for a city in sharp decline.[29] Louisiana officially became a Right-to-Work state in 1976, dismantling strong union jobs in favor of cheap, disposable labor. Record-lows in energy prices in 1985 caused a major oil bust, and as a result, New Orleans led the nation in unemployment, where one in eight people were without jobs.[30] Governor Edwin Edwards sought to revitalize the local economy in the late 1980s by expanding the tourist economy.[31] Kevin Gotham explains that the growth of tourism as the dominant economic sector in New Orleans paralleled the population decline—the population of the New Orleans dropped by 22%, from 627,525 in 1960 to 484,674 in 2000.[32] The New Orleans population from 1990 to 2004 continued to shrink by 2.5%, compared to growth in the rest of the United States, which increased overall by 13.1%.

During this decade, Latinx immigration in New Orleans followed a similar path, lagging behind the rest of the United States, which saw a surge of immigration (documented and undocumented) during the 1990s.[33] The North American Free Trade

Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and similar neoliberal policies throughout the Western Hemisphere spurred this migration as corn subsidies from the United States displaced farmers in rural Mexican communities and demand for cheap labor drew these migrants to factories and farms across the U.S. South.[34] Most southeastern states saw a 200% increase in the Latinx population between 1990-2000, meanwhile, Louisiana's Latinx population during this decade only grew by 16%.[35] The few migrants that came to New Orleans arrived in 1998, when Hurricane Mitch devastated Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua, killing over 11,000 people. Tens of thousands of Honduran migrants fled the devastated nation, many arriving in New Orleans to connect with existing networks in the city. Nationally, 57,000 Hondurans and 2,550 Nicaraguans were granted Temporary Protective Status (TPS), an indefinite status that allows refugees to reside legally in the United States, provides them with a work permit, and protects them from deportations.[36]

In 2001, post-9/11 fears led to a second major shift in perception of Latinx migrants. With the creation of the homeland security state in 2002 immigration went from a labor issue to a terrorist threat, perpetuating state-sponsored xenophobia onto the public.[37] New Orleans would see this beefed up system take a stronghold in the city after Hurricane Katrina, when the disaster promptly reversed the relatively low levels of Latinx migration. As documented and undocumented working class migrants made their way into the Gulf region, the perception of this Latinx community transformed from major trading partner to criminals and tax burdens.[38]

Post-Katrina New Orleans

"We're trying to bring back our tourism business, our restaurants," said New Orleans City Councilmember Oliver Thomas in an interview in 2007 with the *Times-*

Picayune. He went on, "How are we helping our restaurants that are trying to recover by having more food trucks from Texans open up? How do tacos help the gumbo?"[39] Thomas' sentiments were felt across New Orleans as the city saw a massive Latinx influx arrive to help clean up immediately after Katrina. In response to the devastation, the federal government expedited clean up efforts through a "rebuild above all else" ethos that brought in thousands of workers, many undocumented, to do the dirtiest of jobs—clearing out homes, businesses, and schools covered in mold. Workers oftentimes lived on-site without potable water, electricity, and with limited access to safety gear like gloves and masks.[40] To expedite this process, the federal government temporarily suspended key federal labor laws like the Davis Bacon Act, which guarantees a local prevailing wage for all federal workers; OSHA laws, which ensures a safe and protected workplace; and, E-verify system, which enables employers to determine the eligibility of employment.[41] Contractors receiving FEMA funding were left unregulated with no one to ensure payment or protections to workers. Even though these federal laws were reinstated forty-five days after the storm, they set a precedent for employers to hold down wages and deny worker protections, helping create a vulnerable labor force.[42]

The Data Center Research reports that by July 2014, the overall population of New Orleans was 384,320, just 79% of its pre-Katrina numbers.[43] Metropolitan New Orleans, which includes the surrounding parishes, regained 94% of its pre-Katrina population, yet these numbers include a total loss of 95,625 of the black population and 6,811 of the white population. At the same time, the Latinx population rose from 4.4% of the pre-Katrina metropolitan area to 8.7% in July 2015. In New Orleans, these numbers almost doubled from 3.1% to 5.5% with a total estimate of 21,849. In Jefferson Parish,

the Latinx population increased to 14.2% of the population at 61,838.[44] As of July 2014, Hondurans made up 30% of the Latinx population in the metropolitan area compared to just 9% of Hondurans that comprises the national percentage of Hondurans living in the United States. Mexicans comprised 23% of the Latinx population in the Crescent City in 2014, well below the national average of 64% of the total Latinx population nationwide.[45]

The post-Katrina Latinx influx illustrates a byproduct of the neoliberal system, one that deregulates labor laws and slashes wages in order to create a cheap, disposable, and deportable labor. To reinforce this system, Louisiana hosts three immigrant detention centers in the state, with 2,000 total beds, which is 6% of the national percentage, despite the fact that Louisiana's Latinx population only makes up only 0.4% nationally.[46] Moreover, despite having no border with Mexico, New Orleans has emerged as a deportation epicenter. For example, the Secure Communities Initiative, implemented during the Bush administration in 2008, cemented a partnership between ICE officers and local law enforcement, where police officers would send fingerprints taken at the time of booking to ICE officials if the individual was undocumented. Through immigrant detainers, local enforcement could hold undocumented immigrants for an extra forty-eight hours, even if the original charges had been dropped. Upon their discretion, ICE officials could arrive at the jail within the forty-eight hour time period to initiate the deportation process for individuals. In 2012, Gusman's office held 192 people under immigrant detainer holds; 172 were released to ICE agents.[47] In two separate cases in New Orleans, Sheriff Marlin Gusman's office held two day laborers well beyond the forty-eight hour holding period—Antonio Ocampo for 91 days and Mario Cacho for 160

days, despite written complaints filed by Ocampo.[48] After significant community pressure, a lawsuit, and a Consent Decree issued by the Department of Justice, Sheriff Gusman's office ended the agreement with ICE in August 2013.[49]

Similarly, in 2013 the Department of Homeland Security staged a federally funded pilot program in New Orleans called the Criminal Alien Removal Initiative (C.A.R.I.) Raids. Once again, the C.A.R.I. Raids called on local law enforcement's collaboration with ICE agents to indiscriminately raid and racially profile community spaces like apartment complexes, grocery stores, restaurants, bible study groups, and parks.[50] While the program purported to target violent criminals, instead, it arrested parents and youth, instilling fear throughout communities as many people were separated from their families and sent through deportation processes, despite having no record. The program officially ended in January 2014 due to lawsuits and pressures by community members including an act of civil disobedience led by the Congress of Day Laborers which shutdown a major intersection in front of the New Orleans ICE office.

By the end of 2014, the Secure Communities Initiative officially ended, replaced with the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP), which claims to only target high priority criminals. Nonetheless, deportations continued steady under the Obama administration, despite a commitment to target felons, gang members, and individuals that "pose a danger to national security."[51] Low-priority immigrants continue to be caught in raids with thousands of deportations occurring weekly.[52] The damage done by the Secure Communities Initiative and C.A.R.I. raids is difficult to erase, having a forged a sense of distrust and fear of local law enforcement. The anti-immigrant rhetoric thus far of the

Trump administration, which campaigned on building a wall, deporting millions, calling Mexicans "rapists," and "criminals" indicates that these forces will only intensify.[53]

For Latinx food vendors, this vulnerability carries over to their businesses forcing them to locate on the margins of the city and out of the spotlight, to protect their clientele and, oftentimes, themselves. Just across the river from downtown New Orleans, *Las Pulgas* is an open air Latin market in the Algiers neighborhood. Open Saturdays and Sundays, the bustling market sells anything from Lionel Messi soccer jerseys to live chickens to leather handcrafted sandals. Food vendors set up booths throughout the market with Latin American specialties. Prior to Katrina, the outdoor market was run and frequented predominantly by the black community. After the storm and with the increase in the Latinx population in the city, Central American and Mexican vendors expanded the market offering a variety of products and ingredients. In some ways, *Las Pulgas* serves as a microcosm for this Latinx population, situated in the background of a busy intersection, but easily unnoticed by the broader community. It is both visible and invisible with cars and trucks defiantly parked on the neutral ground indicating a crowd, but only detectable if you drive by. These commercial establishments occupy spaces across the city that would otherwise go vacant, building on old traditions as well as creating new ones.

As Central American and Mexican migrants continue to help rebuild homes and business, they also make up part of the 63,620 workers in the food service economy, which almost doubled after Katrina.[54] Latinx dishwashers, cooks, and custodians sustain the restaurant industry in New Orleans, oftentimes working double shifts in order to pay rent, bills, and take care of their family in New Orleans and back home.[55] Many Hondurans are the sole provider for their families that still reside in Honduras, which includes children and parents left behind. High unemployment rates, lack of opportunity, poverty, and violence are the top reasons why Hondurans leave the country. A military coup in 2009 in Honduras of democratically elected left-wing president, Manuel Zelaya, destabilized the region leading to narco-traffickers, gangs, and a corrupt police system to run the country. Dana Frank condemns the Obama administration's role in the coup stating, "President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at first criticized the coup government, led initially by Roberto Micheletti, but then legitimated it."[56] Wikileaks disclosed State Department records that made it clear that the United States was aware of the military coup and therefore should have cut all aid to the country under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.[57] Historically, Honduras has constituted a strategic foothold for the U.S. military.

Post-coup neoliberal reforms, meanwhile, made Honduras "open for business"

Figure 3: Map linking the New Orleans, Mexico, and Honduras Gulf and Caribbean connections.

for multinational companies to buy up land; a militarized police force was put into place to protect these private interests and silence dissent.[58] Berta Caceres, a Honduran activist who spoke out against the building of a dam in the Aguán Valley, was brutally murdered in March 2016, with multiple sources indicating Honduran military involvement.[59] From 2009 until 2015 San Pedro Sula, Honduras was ranked the number one most violent city in the world (not including war torn countries) with 171.2 murders per 100,000 people; the capital, Tegucigalpa, rated consistently in the top ten. Because of this violence and impunity (96% of homicides went without conviction), over one hundred thousand unaccompanied minors made their way to the United States between 2012 and 2016 to reunite with their families and escape gang recruitment and violence.[60] Unaccompanied minors from Central America had no other option but to cross into the United States through the rigorous and life-threatening journey. Upon arrival at the Texas-Mexico border, they were often immediately intercepted by border patrol officials and sent to detention centers across Texas to await their fate in immigration court.

Over two thousand of these unaccompanied minors came to New Orleans to reunite with their families and enroll in the school systems in Orleans and Jefferson Parish.[61] New legal clinics opened like the Project Ishmael and the Pro Bono and Juveniles Project, and older agencies, like Catholic Charities, strengthened their teams in order to accommodate these new minors. Schools hired more ESL staff and developed programming to help teach English and integrate the students. But, overall local, state, and federal policy has failed to adequately incorporate these populations. Rather, they have been labeled as “job stealers” and “illegals,” despite a 2016 business report that

hailed Louisiana's Latinx undocumented population as a positive contribution to the city, including $93.7 million in federal taxes and $42.7 million in local and state taxes.[62]

Recognizing the important and continued contributions of this undocumented community, Orleans City Hall, led by the Neighborhood Engagement Office, passed a "Welcoming City" ordinance in 2014 in order to better serve the growing immigrant population. Objectives of this ordinance aim to improve language access, promote public safety, exhibit cultural competency, and expand access to economic opportunity.[63] Most of the goals are centered on training city employees in cultural competency and providing translation services. But, through their commitment to promote public safety, the "Welcome City" focuses specifically on relations between the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) and the undocumented community. Through a consent decree mandated by the Department of Justice, NOPD has revised its policy regarding documentation status, which prohibits officers from investigating an individual based on "actual or perceived documentation status" and makes clear that immigration law falls "exclusively within the authority" of ICE agents.[64]

While New Orleans has never officially dubbed itself as a "Sanctuary City," instead, it has used the federally sanctioned term, "Welcoming City," which comes directly out of the "White House Task Force on New Americans," effort. Nevertheless, the city has still come under attack from lawmakers.[65] The term "Sanctuary Cities" has become a loaded and politicized term. One of the few clear principles of the "Sanctuary Cities" movement is that it prevents local police from collaborating with ICE officials. Yet, as *The Washington Post* points out, "no state [or city] has the power to prevent an ICE agent from making an arrest, conducting an investigation or stopping a suspected

illegal immigrant. This is all about the degree to which ICE can dragoon local officials into doing the feds' work for them."[66] Thirty-seven cities—consisting of small towns and large metropolises—have directly defied Trump's threats upholding some variation of a sanctuary city.[67]

Conservative politicians within the state of Louisiana directed aim at the New Orleans ordinance claiming it falls within the "Sanctuary City" category. During the Louisiana State Legislature sessions in 2016, lawmakers opted to punish New Orleans' "sanctuary city" ordinance, introducing a bill to deny state funds for public projects, including the port, the Superdome, roads, schools, and the airport.[68] In response, a consortium of pro-immigrant organizations, which included Catholic Charities, Puentes, the Congress of Day Laborers, Vayla, and representatives from City Hall, vehemently opposed the bill in a well-organized push to have it killed. But, in an odd case of conservative logic, outrage from the conservative Jefferson Parish Sheriff Newell Normand cited the bill as just another extension of big government overreach, leading to its demise. "This is a Washington problem that begs of a Washington solution," said Normand claiming that, "the unintended consequences of this bill will make my job incredibly difficult."[69]

Normand's actions along with the mobilization of community organizations helped spare New Orleans from the highly racialized and politicized legislation. And, as Baton Rouge recently faced devastating flooding, many of these undocumented immigrants are the ones cleaning out and rebuilding the homes and government offices of the elected officials that produced this anti-immigrant legislation. Like after Katrina, these undocumented workers were brought in by contractors to fill the most grueling jobs

and to make up for the shortcomings of the neoliberal state, which failed to provide an effective and equitable post-disaster response.

(Trans) National Neoliberalism and Cultural Production Labor

One of the biggest challenges in critiquing neoliberalism outside academia is that few people are familiar with the terminology even as neoliberalism increasingly defines the standards through which we must operate in and against.[70]Aihwa Ong addresses this lack of mainstream understanding of neoliberalism: "In the United States…*neoliberalism* is seldom part of popular discourse outside the academy. Rather, *market-based policies* and *neoconservatism* are the native categories that code the ensemble of thinking and strategies seeking to eliminate social programs and promote the interests of big capital."[71] According to Ong, within the global economy neoliberalism is easily defined, oftentimes by those that are impacted the most. She posits, "In the global popular imagination, American *neoliberalism* is viewed as a radicalized capitalist imperialism that is increasingly tied to lawlessness and military action."[72] This is the definition of neoliberalism to which I adhere.

Much of academia and the global press call Trump's election "an end to neoliberalism" citing his vehement opposition to free trade deals.[73] His protectionist strategies like withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and threats to dismantle (or at least restructure) NAFTA, seem to signal a move away from this unfettered global capitalism. Yet, Trump's privatization focus and deregulation, while at the same time pledging to slash healthcare and housing vouchers, fits within the market-driven narrative as outlined by Milton Friedman. As profits increasingly become prioritized over public well-being, government regulators are purged (abolishing the EPA

and the Department of Energy) and business interests become priorities of beefed up security and military forces (as soon as Trump was elected, private prison stocks yielded a forty percent return).[74]

To describe this phenomenon, at least through the framework of the United States, Sasha Breger Bush, uses the term "national neoliberalism." She suggests that neoliberalism is not dead, rather "it [like Brexit] is being transformed into a geographically more fragmented and localized system."[75] Bush defines "national neoliberalism," as "a fusion of state and market interests, but one in which the marketplace and big business have almost total power and freedom of movement."[76] She argues that instead of favoring working class and labor, this merger will be used to continue domestic privatization initiatives, favor business interests, and bolster protections at home and abroad, including strict immigration policy. She concludes that while the political economy has already shifted in this direction over the last thirty years, the next era will see a much more explicit process of wiping out the public sector, passing anti-worker legislation, and increasing privatization.[77]

Much of the rhetoric within Trump's campaign has been directed at undocumented workers in the United States, with threats of deporting millions of people. Yet, the neoliberal paradigm relies on this type of labor that is considered disposable and cheap. A strong enforcement program—ICE and Border Patrol—is used to keep this class of workers vulnerable and deny them their rights and dignity. An inflated prison industrial complex, which includes immigration detention centers, props up this cycle, and is anticipated to grow. But, none of this ICE machine is new: Often dubbed as "the deporter-in-chief, the Obama administration deported 2.5 million people between 2009-

2015 through the aforementioned Secure Communities and PEP removal initiatives; Trump's administration already has a deportation machine set in place.[78] What will be challenged by the new administration are programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and other special protections for migrants, particularly unaccompanied minors.

Neoliberal policies have already done significant damage to labor since the 1980s, by destroying formal sector jobs, dismantling unions, keeping wages low, and replacing this sector with the service industry economy. Migrant workers—documented and undocumented—increasingly find employment in this industry, making up half (48.8%) of its workers nationally.[79] Because this sector will continue to be vastly deregulated, managers are less likely to check documentation status and are able to pay employees off the books.[80] In Chapter Five, the stories of Paula, a dishwasher, and José, a line cook, illustrate the tension within this service industry economy. This sector provides them employment, stability, legitimacy (for Paula), and an accepting social community (for José), yet they each have to work two jobs to make ends meet.

Moreover, the dissolution of the formal sector has fostered a courtship between the private sector and cultural workers. Scholars like Andrew Ross and Arlene Dávila argue that because the neoliberal economy generates an increased dependence on cultural production labor, it sends more people to work in the informal economy, driving it front and center.[81] The cases of Clara and Leonora in Chapter Two capture this growth of the informal economy through their respective tamale street vending enterprises. For Clara, her work selling tamales provides a flexible schedule to take care of her children and a desirable alternative to the long hours and low pay when she worked as a housekeeper in

the hotel industry. Leonora's approach to her tamale enterprise—selling foods at Latinx soccer leagues and community meetings—illustrates the networks the she has formed and the spaces she has cultivated in order to sell her food. In these cases, Clara and Leonora demonstrate the rise in the informal economy, in which these women reject the dismal conditions of the formal sector opting instead to operate their own precarious enterprises.

Similarly, Ross contends that within this framework, the private sector's focus on culture has "nominated" cultural work as "the new face of neoliberal entrepreneurship."[82] Arlene Dávila, Ross, Sharon Zukin, and Nestor Garcia Canclini each warn against this courtship because these neoliberal logics exploit the culture, without putting adequate value on the labor and understanding the full context of the production. In this sense, culture *is* political and to understand these broader systems of power, we must analyze both culture (in this case food) and labor together.[83] For example, at Tela Café, day laborers eat Honduran food and drink *micheladas* after a long day of construction work. Much of their employment is working nearby in construction on development projects—these are the same developments causing the gentrification that displaces the neighborhood's low-income residents, including the day laborers and their families. Thus, many of these projects, which are oftentimes public-private partnerships, fail to take into account the realities of these workers, only looking at the neighborhoods through the lens of profit and a romanticized image of culture cultivated from dominant trends rather than neighborhood realities.

At the same time, this bootstraps entrepreneurship has worked to the benefit of some undocumented food vendors, particularly Mateo. In Chapter Three, I show how Mateo and his family began selling tamales on the streets of New Orleans immediately

after Katrina, but decided to open up a *lonchera* once the city began to normalize operations and police put pressure on him to get a business license. Over a six-year period, Mateo learned the ropes of the food truck trade in New Orleans and was able to build a chain of *loncheras* across town. In some ways, Mateo embodied the neoliberal ethos as the poster child for individualism and entrepreneurship—bringing himself out of the informal economy and into the business world. Yet Mateo's successes rely greatly on help from his business partner/mentor, Carlos who taught him how to navigate in and around the system. Moreover, Mateo's predominantly day laborer clientele—direct byproducts of the neoliberal economy—remain demonized and criminalized as they look for jobs on the day laborer *esquinas* near Mateo's *lonchera.*

On a transnational level, policies like NAFTA and CAFTA have been detrimental to the economies in places like Mexico and Central America, yet Trump's reasons for opposing these agreements are focused solely on the loss of U.S. jobs. But, what's left out of Trump's national neoliberal rhetoric is the detrimental effects these agreements have had on communities in Central America and Mexico. Deregulation through these free trade agreements allows for poor working conditions in maquiladoras; they lead to heavy subsidies for corn and soy, displacing small farmers; and, they make way for land annexation by corporations.[84] Because Trump's concern with free trade is limited to U.S. jobs, any restructuring on his part seems unlikely to address or change the aspects of these policies that affect communities across U.S. borders. Therefore the displaced working class in Central America and Mexico will continue to be displaced, if not by U.S. maquiladoras, then by other multinational corporations and/or corporate land grabs, thus continuing migration patterns to the United States.

Likewise, the United States has historically turned a blind eye to the corruption and violence over the last seven years in Mexico and Honduras, yet we still maintain a penchant for goods, like palm oil and cocaine, that come out of (or at least through) this region.[85] There seems to be little concern in addressing this insatiable appetite for these products and/or dealing with the rampant violence, corruption, and impunity that support these systems.[86] In this sense, our consumption spurs this displacement and migration. In Chapter Four, the transnational story of the Ramirez family, owners of Tela Café in Mid-City, New Orleans, illustrates how communities are displaced because of this unfettered corporatism—growing African palm oil plantations and mega-resort developments in Tela, Honduras; and a mega-hospital project in New Orleans. In both cases public-private partnerships contribute to the growth of this corporatism, which caters to the developers of private companies. In both Honduras and New Orleans, the fusion of the state with market-interests is at the core of the issue, as public services fall increasingly under the private sector's responsibility, distributing the risk of failure onto the most precarious people.

Using cultural production theory within a transnational framework provides a broader understanding of these global systems. For this research I draw from Pierre Bourdieu's cultural production theory, which posits that rather than just looking at cultural production components in isolation, we must concurrently analyze all aspects of cultural production—the social conditions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of symbolic goods. Considering this cultural production as an interplay or network between social structures and individual agency allows for a more holistic understanding of these processes.[87]

Moreover, in spite of the Trump administration's threats to limit the extent of global markets, the transnational will continue to play a major role in the political economy as we have created unquenchable dependencies on products and reliance on the labor of people that come from beyond the reaches of U.S. domestic markets. Linking to broader global issues of exploitation, Andrew Ross posits that it "demonstrates all too clearly that the fight for fair labor can and should be genuinely transnational."[88] Thus, scholars like Ross and Canclini advocate for researchers to take a more rounded understanding of issues—examining the culture *and* the labor—within a global milieu, outside of a "western criteria," and, instead, taking into account the past and present socio-political context.[89]

***Acompañando* Ethnography, Transnationalism, and the Congress of Day Laborers**

This research is grounded in accompaniment ethnography, first introduced to me as *acompañando* during a keynote speech by Alfonso Gonzales at *Global Studies Association* annual conference in Austin, TX. When I followed up with Gonzales about his methodological theory, he directed me to an article by Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, which further informed my perspective on the role of accompaniment in scholarship. Tomlinson and Lipsitz describe accompaniment as, "asking and answering questions important to the increasing numbers of displaceable, disposable, and deportable people in this society," and call for scholars to work with these individuals in social movement organizations to "respond honestly and honorably to the indignities and injustices we see."[90]

Accompaniment historically is a popular tool used in liberation theology and reintroduced by Paul Farmer and Roberto Goizueta as an instrument in creating solidarity

and empathy within aid work.[91] This accompaniment has also become a tool increasingly employed by community organizing groups, like the Congress of Day Laborers, to build awareness with allies, particularly concerning the injustices of the immigration system. As the Trump administration's aggressive new immigration policies allow for far more deportations, this accompaniment has helped to create protections for undocumented individuals during routine ICE check-ins and court hearings. In my work, this accompaniment methodology not only informed my research for this book, but also allowed for a practical application of this knowledge to be used on the community-level. From interpreting in traffic court and accompanying individuals to the immigration appointments at the ICE office, my worldview has been shaped by these experiences, recognizing my own privilege and positionality in regards to these injustices that these individuals confront.

Moreover, my accompaniment fieldwork provided me with opportunities to help individuals working in the service industry—from wage theft claims to opening up a business. For example, in Chapter Three I discuss one experience going with a Congress of Day Laborer member to get her food truck license. When Magda, an undocumented Honduran woman, wanted to open her own *lonchera,* one of the organizers of the Congress of Day Laborers assigned me to help her through this bureaucratic process. Accompaniment in this case directly linked my research and applied work, going into the field (New Orleans City Hall) with Magda. Yet, in this case, my presence as an outsider and (to a certain degree) a rule follower, thwarted her ability to get a license because of my lack of knowledge of the "practical norms," or the ways in which individuals navigate around or outside certain policies in order to make ends meet.[92] Accompaniment, in this

tragic case, illuminated the deficiencies of City Hall's ostensibly liberal business policy, in which it failed to take into account the realities of this community and their interpretations of food truck entrepreneurship. Moreover, it showed the failure on my end to grasp the linguistic nuance between *lonchera* (food truck *or* trailer) and food truck. Magda had a trailer.

Likewise, this methodology has revealed to me the "practical norms" learned and employed by these communities to help them to maneuver through complicated and conflicting policies. Further, it has allowed me to see firsthand the challenges these individuals face in attempting to prove their legitimacy within a system that thrives off their vulnerability. By accompanying these individuals through these processes, they have introduced me to methods of resistance to neoliberal structures that perpetuate the oppression of these working class communities. And, they have shown me different ways that these individuals have been able to forge community and power in the midst of these vulnerabilities.

Similarly, adding a transnational perspective to this research has enabled me to broaden the scope of my work to go beyond New Orleans in order analyze larger global structures that impact migration processes. In her research, Lara Putnam argues that scholars should tie "data to place" in order to build "depth, contextualization, and geopolitical awareness."[93] The friendships I gained working with the Congress of Day Laborers linked me with different food establishment owners and workers and allowed me the opportunity to visit their homes in New Orleans and families in Honduras. Expanding upon exploratory research I conducted in Honduras through a Tinker Foundation Grant in 2013, I returned to Honduras in the summer of 2015 to conduct

further fieldwork. I reunited with the initial contacts I made in 2013 and made new connections. Each of the people I visited were families of Congress of Day Laborers members who generously offered up their homes. Visiting five towns and cities in Honduras—Esquipulas del Norte, Catacamas, Atima, San Pedro Sula, and Tela—helped me to contextualize the transnational journeys of these individuals, to get to know the people and places they left behind, and to better grasp the conditions from which they fled.

This fieldwork in Honduras helped to further develop my research, offering new fields of inquiry that address impacts of global policies. Moreover, this transnational perspective exposed the dire conditions that individuals face if they are forced to return to the violence and corruption that plagues Honduras. Like the accompaniment methodology, I was also able to use my fieldwork in Honduras beyond just informing the research in this book. Working with the Congress of Day Laborers, I drafted country condition reports used for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to request prosecutorial discretion in deportation cases. Similarly, I used this transnational fieldwork to inform my testimony as an expert witness in Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) cases for unaccompanied minors. One of these cases in Orleans Parish Juvenile Court led the judge to inquire how Honduras could be more dangerous than New Orleans. While I had plenty of data to prove it, her question did force me to further unpack this complicated and shared history of violence in these two regions, drawing in parallels of power structures, privatization efforts, and neoliberal reforms.

Throughout my research process, members and organizers of the Congress of Day Laborers served as gatekeepers for my research, helping me to identify and access

contacts, providing me with political and cultural context to situations, and advising me on ethical questions that emerged while studying vulnerable communities. Because I reference this organization throughout my research, a background on their foundation is imperative. The Congress of Day Laborers is part of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ), an umbrella organization dedicated to building worker power, advancing racial justice, and organizing to build a social movement across race and industry for laborers in the city. Formed in 2006, the NOWCRJ is comprised of a legal department and three organizations: the Congress of Day Laborers, a member-led group of Latinx reconstruction workers fighting for labor, immigration, and civil rights; the National Guestworkers' Alliance, an organization led by guestworkers and unified against the exploitation of these workers; and Stand with Dignity, a grassroots organization fighting for the rights of the working class black community in New Orleans. Usually pitted against each other within the broader political economy, these groups have forged strong ties and cross-racial alliances to combat the injustices perpetuated by a system that consistently devalues workers and their labor.

The Congress of Day Laborers emerged in response to abuses by law enforcement and contractors at *esquinas* immediately after Katrina. Latinx day laborers congregated along with black and white local laborers at the base of Lee Circle, a central location and traffic roundabout with easy access for potential employers to recruit workers.[94] When the National Guard, ICE agents, and local police began threatening workers through multiple raids at the Lee Circle *esquina*, the day laborers organized themselves to fight against these attacks. To document this mistreatment, the New Orleans Worker Justice Coalition, the Advancement Project, and the National Immigration Law Center published

a report entitled, “And Injustice For All: Workers’ Lives in the Reconstruction of New Orleans,” consisting of 700 interviews conducted by student volunteers between January and April 2006. The report shed light on the harsh conditions and criminalization of workers after Katrina.

Following the report, member-led organizations like the Congress of Day Laborers formed in response to continued abuses by employers and law enforcement officials. The Congress of Day Laborers developed their first of many campaigns in 2006, aimed to protect workers’ rights to seek out and negotiate work in public spaces like the *esquinas.* Soon after, the Congress of Day Laborers formed an anti-wage theft campaign aimed to draw attention to the widespread issue and help workers recuperate money. On May Day 2006, over one thousand workers took the streets marching through the Central Business District and down Canal Street, in support of workers’ rights in the city.

Early on, the Congress of Day Laborers organized a soccer tournament at Audubon Park with the different day laborer *esquinas* making up each team. Men and women sold tamales and *pollo con tajadas* (chicken with fried plantains) on the sidelines to fans. Health-based organizations like Common Ground and the Latino Health Outreach set up tables to inform the fans and players of their services. During halftime of these soccer games, a group of five Guatemalan brothers called Los Chapines Valientes performed popular theatre for the crowds to educate them through “Know Your Rights” skits. The Chapines Valientes, brought their traditions as politicized teachers in rural Guatemala to New Orleans to help educate the community on these important issues that continue to plague the day laborer community. At that time Congress of Day Laborer

organizers visited the five major *esquinas* weekly to educate workers about rights and help galvanize membership to participate in the monthly meetings, which brought together representatives from each of the *esquinas*.

By the time I began working with the Congress of Day Laborers in March 2011, the larger assembly meeting became weekly. When Luis returned to Honduras in November 2012, the Congress of Day Laborers shifted its focus more to local and national campaigns and to realizing the weekly Wednesday night meetings. By 2013, the number of attendees at the weekly meetings grew from forty people to 200 each week. Assemblies moved from the small meeting room at the NOWCRJ's shotgun office to different churches and cultural spaces across the city. My role shifted from Luis' driver to accompanying members to court, ICE check-ins, and medical visits, helping them to navigate these convoluted systems. Along with other volunteers, I helped organizers balance the heavy workload that came with the increased membership—translating documents, tracking down individuals detained in ICE facilities, and conducting consultations after meetings with members.

The Congress of Day Laborers eventually hired more organizers to take over these tasks along with the strategy-based organizing, and my duties once again shifted to researcher for deportation cases, maximizing on the expertise I gained from visiting Honduras. They kept me around because I stayed around, willing to do the legwork. And I maximized on my privileges—bilingual, U.S. citizen, owner of a car—to help individuals navigate daunting spaces like courts and jails. When I began working with the Congress of Day Laborers, I had no idea the role that the organization would play in my research, other than helping link me to different restaurants in the city. But, this work has

helped reframe my research and worldview, from an uncomplicated field of inquiry in my master's thesis that questioned the role of fusioned foods on Latino identity politics to using Latinx cultural production and labor systems to understand the broader political economy, interrogating neoliberal policies, philosophies, and systems. Friendships and connections through Congress of Day Laborer organizers and members helped provide me with a more nuanced interrogation into the relationship between work, market, and culture as well as understanding ways in which people operate within and resist neoliberal structures.

Conclusion: Food, Neoliberalism and Latinx Undocumented Immigration

This interdisciplinary research is based in the areas of Latinx Studies, Labor Studies, Food Studies, and urban anthropology. All the cases I use are stories told to me by individuals in New Orleans and Honduras; however, I changed the names to protect the anonymity of the employers, workers, and the food establishments. Further research would benefit from a deeper analysis using gender studies and further exploring the relationship between the black and Latinx communities in New Orleans.

This research joins the increasing number of scholars in the field of Latinx Studies in using the gender nonconforming term, Latinx. In their collaborative introduction to the *American Quarterly,* Licia Fiol-Matta and Macarena Gomez-Barris posit, "From the South and in the borderlands, the 'x' turns away from the dichotomous, toward a void, an unknown, a wrestling with plurality, vectors of multi-intentionality, and the transitional meanings of what has yet to be seen."[95] Latinx Studies scholar, Frances Negrón-Muntaner contends that, "It seems that the 'x' is also standing in for a critique to

larger structures of power."[96] Perhaps most significantly, members of the Congress of Day Laborers have taken up the use of Latinx in their vernacular culture.

Together, the following chapters offer a new paradigm for understanding the relationship between food and labor within the context of undocumented Latinx immigration. Chapter Two, "Freewheeling Tamale Vending," explores the role of itinerant street vendors in New Orleans taking a historical look at Tomás, a tamale vendor originally from Mexico who arrived to New Orleans after the Mexican revolution to work on the railroads in the U.S. South. Tomás and his wife, Lupe, passed on their famous tamale recipe to their grandchildren—third generation, U.S. citizens—who left their work in the formal sector to open their itinerant business, "Lupitas Hot Tamales" in 2010. Juxtaposing the stories of Tomás, Lupe, and their grandchildren along with contemporary stories of Clara and Leonora, two street vendors originally from Honduras, shows the shifts in immigration policy and the structuring of the political economy from the early twentieth century up until post-Katrina New Orleans. These stories offer a transnational lens showing the shifting role and increased reliance on the informal sector in New Orleans.

Similarly, Chapter Three, "Street Legal: Tacos Trucks, Changing Circumstances, and Shifting Policies," emphasizes the role of papers and documentation in the quest to open a *lonchera* in New Orleans. This chapter parallels the experiences of *lonchera* owners, like Mateo, originally from Veracruz, Mexico, and the day laborer *esquinas*, to explore the shifting and inconsistent policies that impact these people and spaces. The story of Magda and her efforts in opening a *lonchera* illustrate challenges individuals

face within the changing local policies. *Loncheras* were both new and emblematic of the New Orleans recovery, allowing workers to access mobile foods during a time when most food establishments, including corner stores and restaurants, were closed. Yet, the *loncheras* didn't quite fit into to the romanticized ideal of a "food truck," thus illustrating the failures of lawmakers to understand the realities (and permanence) of these Latinx entrepreneurs and their clientele. Paralleling the concomitant rise of gourmet food trucks, I analyze the experiences of these lonchera owners in accessing public space and legitimacy in a city dominated by brick and mortar food establishments.

Chapter Four, "A Tale of Two Telas: A Struggle for Place," takes on a more transnational narrative linking New Orleans to Honduras and centering on the Honduran restaurant, Tela Café, owned by the Ramirez sisters. Tela Café represents a restaurant experience in the Mid-City neighborhood, which is being gentrified through a mega-hospital project, which causes the displacement of black and Latinx communities. I use a transnational lens, visiting their father, Don Santiago, and his bar located just outside of Tela, Honduras, to examine the impacts of a mega-resort project and the growing African Palm Oil plantations that directly impact Santiago's small community and the neighboring Garifuna village. I historically link these mega-projects to United Fruit Company's colonization of the Tela region throughout the mid-twentieth century to examine the impacts of unfettered capitalism and corporate imperialism.

Chapter Five, "Latinx Workers in the Service Industry Economy of New Orleans" explores the growth of the service industry economy, which saw the number of food establishments double post-Katrina. I tell the story of Paula, originally from Honduras, who escaped violence and poverty, leaving behind a young son. Paula cleans houses

during the day and works as a dishwasher in a high-end uptown restaurant at night. I compare the story of Paula with the story of José, a queer, undocumented drag performer originally from Veracruz, Mexico that works two restaurant jobs while also organizing the yearly festival "Miss Gay Latina." I explore the importance of restaurants as spaces of stability and refuge for these workers. I complicate that notion by analyzing the low wages and long hours in these deregulated spaces that make up part of the growing service industry economy in New Orleans.

Chapter Six, "Politicize Food and Value Labor," uses an activist approach that draws on scholarly research that calls for transnational alliances that span race, class, gender, sexuality, and immigration status, like the collaboration between the Congress of Day Laborers and BreakOut!, a transgender and queer youth of color community organizing group. This chapter also offers tangible solutions to informal economies that build on successful cooperatives in places like San Francisco. Moreover, this chapter builds on the concept of "practical norms" as a direct response to policies.

Going with Luis to the day labor *esquinas* gave me early insight into the vulnerabilities of these spaces and of this Latinx community. It also gave me perspective on the ways in which culture, particularly food, is produced in the midst of these vulnerabilities. On a more micro-scale, these stories highlight the tensions between small business owners and the service industry workers, introducing questions about the politics of restaurants and food establishments. Analyzing the roots of exploitation of these workers, in kitchens or on construction sites, as well as the policies that affect their daily lives provides a critical lens to examine the impacts of neoliberal policies on these Latinx communities and into the ways they resist these structures. Linking the historical

continuities to these contemporary narratives allows for a better understanding of the shifts in perception, surveillance, and control that directly shape the integration of these communities.

Chapter Two

Freewheeling Tamale Vending

As I sat at a bar in the French Quarter, a man in a brown cowboy hat, jeans and a black t-shirt showed up in the front entrance. He peered into the bar, displaying a large, insulated nylon bag that draped around his shoulder; his shirt pithily read, “Hot Tamales” in white, all-cap font. My friends were well acquainted with Alejandro, having had his tamales on several occasions during French Quarter outings. Since arriving in New Orleans after Katrina, Alejandro, originally from Mexico, met and married his Honduran wife who prepares the tamales. As we ordered from Alejandro, he explained that the tamales are part Honduran because they are wrapped in plantain leaves and part Mexican because of the spiciness.

Since 2014, Alejandro has worked his way through the French Quarter selling tamales in different bars and street corners. Years of experience slinging tamales to hungry locals and tourists helped him learn the hard way which bars welcomed his services and which did not—New Orleans city ordinance prohibits street vending in the French Quarter and many food establishments are eager to chase off unwanted competition.[1] The bartender didn’t question Alejandro’s presence even as several patrons opted for his tamales over the crawfish Rangoon, red beans and rice, and chargrilled oysters featured on the menu. Alejandro’s tamale business is an example of how vendors

navigate around legal requirements creating informal economies to make ends meet. These economies illustrate how culture is produced and consumed for financial gain, which in some cases, may develop into formal businesses through restaurants and taco trucks. Historian J.T. Way posits that "for most people the informal economy is the economy. It defines the financial reality in which they live."[2] In New Orleans, individuals, like Alejandro, increasingly use these street vending economies as a means to sustain themselves; the informal economy is their reality.[3]

In this chapter, I analyze tamale production and street vending enterprises, first through a broader context of street vending in New Orleans, then through three case studies of tamale vending families, to show how individuals navigate within the informal sector. Examining these processes of cultural production, distribution and consumption forces us to interrogate the role of neoliberal dynamics that increasingly make this informal work more relevant. In each of the cases, the tamale vendors left their employment in the formal sector, opting instead for these street vending jobs.[4] In some cases, the informal economy is temporary, a side hustle, or a stepping-stone to test out a new business. In other cases, the informal economy is preferred and, therefore, more permanent, illustrating the informal sector's increased legitimacy and potential for growth in sustaining livelihoods.

In the examples that I use, immigration status plays a major role in determining the mobility and, to a certain degree, visibility of these vendors. Using Arlene Dávila's concept of mobility, I argue that immigration status and class impacts the "hierarchy of mobility" of these individuals in their ability to access both physical mobility (movement throughout the city) and social mobility (marketability). Dávila posits that her concern is

to “expose that creative industries generates particular mobilities, that they favor certain types of mobile bodies while circumscribing the social and physical mobility of others.”[5] While the product—the tamale—is similar, the “hierarchy of mobility” of these vendors varies, determining their ability to operate without constraint through the city. Moreover, the respective understandings of these individuals in regards to their role within cultural production impact their “hierarchy of mobility” as well.

In his research on migrant street vendors in the Silicon Valley, Christian Zloniski’s defines informal economies as, “income-generating occupations that escape the control of the state and local government authorities.[6] In many cases, the state enables these informal economies through privatization and anti-labor policies like Right to Work, making the informal economy an escape from the “degradation of jobs” in the formal sector.[7] Fostered by neoliberal policies, informal economies become central to the economy (not just to the worker); as formal sector jobs disappear, the informal sector gains more importance.[8] The rise of the informal economy is a direct byproduct the neoliberal economy, which thrives on the deregulation, entrepreneurship, and a bootstraps mentality. Miguel Angel Centeno and Alejandro Tores argue that, “informal self-employment ceases to be ‘a cushion’ against the ups-and-downs of the formal sector labor demand to become a *desirable* alternative to it. Street vending, for instance, becomes preferable to the wages and work conditions available in ‘formal’ privatized plants.”[9] These scholars show how the informal economy has shifted from the periphery to the center as neoliberal policies dismantle good jobs, making the flexibility and stability of this itinerant employment more attractive.

Moreover, in Myron Beasley's research on informal economies run by women in Haiti, he considers these informal economies as sites of resistance.[10] Beasley posits, "The women's resistance takes the form of usurping and navigating the corridors of national taxes and licensing, and even the structures of international aid programs."[11] Like the Latinx itinerant food vendors in New Orleans, Haitian food vendors shirk local, state and federal policies. At the same time, as Beasley argues, they help to reinforce community ties *and* provide efficient systems of serving familiar and affordable food to marginalized communities.

Dávila further discusses the rise of the informal sector positing "most locally initiated activity borders on informality, especially activity initiated by the most disenfranchised people, who are least able to access permits."[12] Many street vending jobs are increasingly racialized and criminalized, as vendors are required to have state-sponsored documentation to operate and subsist. For undocumented entrepreneurs, pathways to legalization, of both businesses and people, are oftentimes too expensive, too bureaucratic, or impossible because of political obstacles. Moreover, obstructions to obtaining this type of licensing—red tape, language barriers, racial profiling—perpetuate fear among these communities. In response, individuals, defy these systems of bureaucracy, asserting agency to create highly efficient, versatile, and oftentimes lucrative means to cultivate their own legitimacy and networks through these street vending enterprises.

Tamales and Street Vending in New Orleans

New Orleans isn't renowned for its tamale culture like it is for its gumbos and po'boys, yet tamales play a significant role in the social fabric of the city, indicating a

long history of migration. The earliest versions of tamales have pre-Columbian roots dating back to the Mississippian culture and to the Maya in Mesoamerica who capitalized on the abundance of maize found throughout the region.[13] The origin stories of the specific U.S. Southern-style tamales vary, with some arguing that these tamales span a few hundred years. Adapted from the African foodways tradition of *cush*, this tamale version originated during the antebellum period. Amy Evans explains that to make meals stretch, enslaved people wrapped cornmeal with spices to produce a flavorful, cheap, and filling dish.[14] Other origin stories suggests that these Southern-style hot tamales developed from migrants that came to the United States during the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, replacing black laborers that left during the Great Migration. The black laborers that remained in the South worked together in the fields with Mexican migrants, sharing their foodways traditions.[15]

The contemporary versions of New Orleans-style hot tamales feature generous amounts of cayenne, ground beef, tomato sauce, chili powder, rolled in corn meal to make small, thin strips. The strips are then wrapped in parchment paper, a more economical alternative to cornhusks use in Mexico or plantain leaves used in Central America. [16] The more common, Delta-style tamales based out of Mississippi, are similar to the New Orleans-style tamales, but are wrapped in cornhusks, simmered instead of steamed, served wet, and, like the New Orleans-style tamales, use corn meal instead of *masa de harina* (corn flour).[17] These Southern-style hot tamales transcend race, having been adopted and adapted by black and white communities across Louisiana and Mississippi.

Jeffrey Pilcher writes about the Chili Queens of San Antonio and the tamale wagons in Los Angeles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which popularized the tamales, but polemicized their street-vending methods due to citywide complaints of unsanitary conditions.[18] Gustavo Arrellano claims that the iconic image of the tamale vendor, in places like Los Angeles and San Francisco, died out in the early twentieth century, but gained traction eastward in places like Mississippi, New Orleans, and Chicago. Arrellano points to pop culture references of tamales that emerged during the mid-twentieth century. In 1935, Mississippi bluesman, Robert Johnson, released "They're Red Hot" about roadside tamales. And in 1951, the film, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, set in New Orleans, features a cameo of a tamale man shouting "Red Hots" in the background.[19] From Mexican tamales to Delta-style tamales, these foods can be found on street corners, in farmers' markets, and on restaurant menus across New Orleans.

At the intersection of Claiborne Avenue and Toledano Streets in Central City, the black-owners of M & M Hot Tamales travel weekly from Woodville, Mississippi, 135 miles north of New Orleans. The team sells chicken tamales out of the back of a minivan to customers—regulars and newcomers—that pass by the busy intersection on Friday evenings. At the Crescent City Farmers' Market in the Warehouse District, Isabel Mendez, originally from Guanajuato, Mexico, has sold her Mexican-style tamales each week since 1999. Alongside fresh vegetables picked from her farm 70 miles away in Independence, Louisiana, Isabel offers a selection of bean, cheese, and jalapeño flavored tamales.[20] At the Crescent City Farmers Market in Mid-City, Pam Warner sells her gourmet version of tamales through her business, Tessier Gourmet, stating that she

learned the recipe for Latin-style tamales from her mother, who was taught by a Mexican friend.[21] Warner, a white woman from Folsom, Louisiana, features tamales along with comfort foods like grits, meatloaf, and lasagna that she prepares in her kitchen fifty miles north of New Orleans. Warner's tamales cater to vegetarian and non-vegetarian customers, with flavors like artichoke and roasted garlic; black bean and corn; eggplant and portabella; beef; and venison.[22] At the farmers' markets, each vendor pays a fee to host a booth at the weekly market.

These long commutes from over an hour's drive outside the city illustrate the local demand for these tamales and the versatility of the dish, accommodating the tastes of customers and adopting to local and global styles. Their commutes also indicate an ostensible dearth of tamales makers in the city, even though many Latinx tamale vendors, like Alejandro, sell their products regularly across the city, operating risky enterprises in pubic spaces. These vendors have little access to places like farmers' markets due to their documentation status and language barriers, or they are simply unaware that these spaces exist. For these same reasons, they oftentimes shirk the red tape-laden labyrinth of licensing, thus rendering their businesses illicit in the eyes of the state. But for many vendors, this informal economy is their main source of income or it helps supplement revenue from a low-wage service industry job. It is also a much more versatile job that allows them to create their own schedule and be their own boss.

Street vendors provide an invaluable service to their families and to their customers. They also risk confrontation by police, tickets, and, in some cases deportation. Restrictions and racial profiling of tamale vendors are not new. Pilcher's research

examines the historical regulations of the Chili Queens of San Antonio and the tamale pushcarts in Los Angeles beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century. He describes how urban reformers aimed to clean up the streets by launching multiple campaigns targeting these vendors. City officials framed these vendors as unhygienic and had their stands removed or placed with impractical restrictions, like screens that restricted access and visibility.[23] Pilcher states, "these vendors were depicted as sirens of the Old Southwest, seducing unwary visitors with hot tamales and rapacious sexuality, thereby spreading 'Montezuma's Revenge' and racial contamination."[24] The Chili Queens' livelihoods were eventually shutdown in 1940s.

Contemporary vendors meet much harsher punishments, beyond bans and fines; these modern-day enterprises face the risk of deportation through the Secure Communities Program (now called Priority Enforcement Program—PEP). In this program ICE agents collaborate with local police to deport individuals with major criminal offenses, but 79% of the deportations under Secure Communities have led to the deportation of people with no criminal records or for low-level offenses.[25] Under the Trump administration, this programming is expected to amplify, still targeting "criminals" as a priority, but with even less oversight and compound with more racism and xenophobia. In 2012, police in Sacramento arrested Juana Reyes, an undocumented woman selling tamales in a Wal-Mart parking lot. Rather than receiving a fine for operating without a license, she was racially profiled, arrested, and placed in a police car along with her two young children. Through the Secure Communities Program, she was transferred to ICE to commence her deportation process. Her young children were put in foster care.[26] In response, a national petition, "Don't Deport the Tamale Lady," helped

create a public persona and garner enough attention from community members, immigration advocates and local authorities, eventually leading to her release.[27] The tamale lady's arrest and threat of deportation illustrates the precarious nature of these unlicensed businesses, yet many undocumented individuals rely on these types of jobs to bring in money. To them, the risk is worth the flexibility and value of the job.

For example, on Friday evenings in New Orleans, two women post up in front of a Latin market in Mid-City. They stay there until they sell all their Honduran-style tamales; or until store managers or the police chase them off. The women have no signage, just their voices promoting their product and two Coleman coolers at their side storing their corn-based contraband. At three dollars apiece, the women usually make between $300 and $400 each weekend. Customers pull their cars over to purchase tamales; others buy them as they exit the store. I watched one evening as the store manager approached the women, asking them to leave the premises. The women retreated to the side of the store, continuing their sales, only to be sent away again by the manager who watched them from cameras inside the building. Seventeen miles away, on Alcee Fortier Boulevard in the predominately Black and Vietnamese neighborhood of New Orleans East, a Honduran woman sells tamales from the back of an old Ford Explorer. She posts up outside a Latin supermarket adjacent to a Vietnamese restaurant located in a shopping center. Her presence along with the newly opened Honduran restaurant and the Latin supermarket are indicators of a growing Latinx community in the New Orleans East neighborhood.

These methods of clandestine food vending in New Orleans aren't just limited to tamales. When I visited the *esquinas* with Luis while volunteering with the Congress of

Day Laborers, I often observed as hatchback cars pulled up to the crowds of laborers. Rather than approaching the car en masse, as is the protocol when a contractor pulls up to an *esquina,* the day laborers recognized the car, allowing the driver to park. On one occasion, I watched as the back of the car popped open revealing a makeshift kitchen full of crockpots, hot plates, Tupperware containers, and kitchen utensils. A pair of women served foods in Styrofoam containers, portioning out rice, seasoned meat, and beans, with a cabbage-based salad on top. One woman took orders and collected payment as the other woman dished out the plates. A friend of mine who sells food surreptitiously at construction sites said that she responds to requests directly from the workers. She explained, "The night before, guys call me up to make requests for plates of food—*carne asada,* pork chops. They tell me how many to prepare, ten, twelve, sometimes less, and we prepare the meals early that morning and deliver to the site before midday." She said that she hasn't had many issues with law enforcement questioning her business, but she emphasized that she is careful and keeps an eye out for police.

On another occasion, as I walked to a coffee shop in the Mid-City neighborhood around lunchtime, I watched as a woman pulled up to a construction site with a carful of premade lunches already packed in Styrofoam containers. I approached the woman, asking her what type of food she had. "*Arroz con pollo*," she responded and I asked if I could purchase a plate. She nodded her head yes. I had no cash, but assured her that I would get some from the ATM just inside. Five minutes later, I returned to her spot with the money, but she was gone. A few months later, as I headed to my car in the Treme neighborhood, I saw the same woman selling food at another construction site. When I recognized a member of the Congress of Day Laborers purchasing food from her, I

greeted him. He introduced me to the woman and I explained that I had seen her before at a nearby spot. She laughed and said that she remembered me and that she had fled because she feared that I was some version of authority there to report her. Her reaction demonstrates the fear that resonates with many of these street vendors employed in these precarious street economies.

The cases of Tomás Fernandez, a Mexican man who sold tamales on Canal Street in the 1920s and the experiences of Clara and Leonora, two Honduran street vendors that arrived to New Orleans after Katrina, provides a historical lens to analyze the continuities of street vending in New Orleans, focusing on the shifts in policy and perception that directly impact the integration and mobility (spatial and class) of these migrant street vendors. The case of Tomás Fernandez, a tamale vendor-turned-restaurant owner during the mid-twentieth century, provides historical context to the policing of street vendors. Tomás arrived in New Orleans from Mexico City in 1921 and began selling tamales on Canal Street around1923. Despite fines for "peddling" tamales on the street corners, Tomás was able to gain enough financial and cultural capital to develop a successful restaurant business with his wife Lupe, who is originally from Veracruz. After Tomás's death, the restaurant closed, but Lupe continued to sell food out of her house in order to make money. In 2010, Lupe and Tomás's grandchildren, Karen and Tommy (third generation Mexican-Americans), decided to carry on the legacy of their grandparents by opening their own itinerant tamale business, Lupita's Hot Tamales, named after their beloved grandmother, Lupe. Karen and Tommy, both U.S. citizens, face their own legal challenges as they sell tamales in prohibited areas across the metropolitan area, yet they

enjoy their relative stability which enables them to advertise publically, operate with a business license, and set goals of opening their own tamale distribution center.

On the contrary, Clara and Leonora, two dueling tamale vendors that sell food outside of Congress of Day Laborer meetings, illustrate the vulnerabilities that impact contemporary migrant experiences. Despite having seemingly similar backgrounds and livelihoods, Clara and Leonora's stories demonstrate the contingencies that play into these transnational narratives. Clara, an undocumented, street food vendor originally from Honduras, embarks on a risky enterprise with limited mobility. As a single mother of five, Clara works off and on as a hotel housekeeper, supplementing her income through her street vending business. Clara's case provides a better understanding of how immigration policies and city ordinances affect access and vulnerability. Leonora, a naturalized citizen through her Puerto Rican husband, has more mobility through her documentation status, but faces similar limitations as Clara due to cultural barriers like language. Through a catering license obtained through a friend, Leonora is able to access more events than Clara, yet she encounters other limitations, like her Jehovah Witness religion, which sets parameters on where she can sell her foods. The contemporary case of Karen and Tommy, especially compared to Clara and Leonora, demonstrates the increased mobility of third generation Mexican-Americans compared to the newer Central American and Mexican vendors. These examples illustrate how documentation status is at the crux of prohibiting and/or granting mobility.

From Street Peddling to Lupita's Hot Tamales

From his publicized arrest for street peddling tamales in 1928 to owning three Mexican restaurants across New Orleans to his grandchildren opening their own tamale

stand in 2010, Tomás created a lasting legacy in the Mexican food industry in New Orleans. Originally from Guanajuato, Mexico, Tomás left during the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, arriving to the United States in 1921 and became a U.S. citizen in 1955.[28] His initial work on the railroad allowed him to travel throughout Mississippi and Louisiana, leading him to eventually settle in New Orleans. After leaving the railroad industry, Tomás began selling tamales on the streets of New Orleans in 1923 to supplement his job as a cook at La Lune restaurant in the French Quarter.

Tomás would oftentimes ask off work during Mardi Gras and other major holidays to sell his famous tamales on the streets. A 1928 *Times-Picayune* article entitled "Two Peddlers Jailed on Parking Charge" covered Tomás's arrest for selling tamales on Canal Street in a "police campaign to stop illegal parking on boulevards by this class of tradesmen."[29] Despite this minor run in with the law, Tomás prospered. According to *Times-Picayune,* Tomás's tamale business overshadowed his long tenure at La Lune.

As Tomás's business grew, so did his recognition in the *Times-Picayune*. An article from 1930, entitled "Fernandez' [sic] Hot Tamale is Treat to Orleanians," described the Mexican tamales to its readers and outlined the process for purchasing them.[30] The article reads, "Many Orleanians have formed the habit of driving by the corner of Canal and Robertson streets between the hours of 5 p.m until 1 a.m and carrying home a dozen or two of these delicious tamales."[31] Tomás's business even boasted delivery services of tamales with a one dollar cover charge to "any address in the city when the order calls for five or more dozens."[32] The newspaper further read, "Mr. Fernandez would like for the public to know that his product is sold only at the one place, and that they are not peddled on the streets of the city."[33] Published around the same time

as the campaigns against the Chili Queens of San Antonio, Tomás seemed to distance himself from his earlier days of traditional street peddling aiming to legitimize his business through a sanitized, brick and mortar establishment.

Moreover, an article from 1931 stated that Tomás opened a tamale making plant, which offered more perks than his old one "particularly from the standpoint of sanitation" further confirming this fixation on hygiene.[34] In this article Tomás also distances himself from other tamale vendors in the city stating, "certain tamale vendors have been representing their tamales as coming from his plant, and he wants this impression corrected for the benefit of his customers."[35] Around the same time, another tamale vendor emerged in the city—Manual Fernandez (no relation to Tomás). When Miguel arrived to New Orleans he started working with Tomás, but when Miguel married in 1933, he opened his own stand, "Miguel's Hot Tamales," on the corner of Canal and Carrollton Avenue in Mid-City, selling a dozen tamales costing fifteen cents.[36]

MEXICAN DISHES AT CHAPULTEPEC RESTAURANT HERE

New Place on St. Charles Street Features Favorite Food of Mexico

Genuine Mexican dishes (Platillos Genuinamente Mexicanos) are offered at the new Chapultepec Restaurant at 711 St. Charles street for the indulgence of the New Orleans public which in general enjoys "the different" in cooking.

This new addition to the New Orleans restaurant field, which already enjoys a country-wide reputation for good meals, was formally opened on

Figure 4: An article in the *Times-Picayune* describing the opening of Tomás's restaurant on St. Charles Avenue from November 30, 1931.

In 1931, Tomás began another business venture, opening Chapultepec Restaurant on St. Charles Avenue with his business partner Albert Chazaro—the son of a wealthy family from Tlacotalpan outside of Veracruz. *Times-Picayune* reported that this

new restaurant would satisfy "the indulgence of the New Orleans public which in general enjoys 'the different' in cooking" and "you New Orleans gourmets who really enjoy the different, the unusual, might drop in at the Chapultepec Restaurant." The article further reinforced the concept of sanitation and hygiene, "Many are very pleased over the fact that they now can go to a modern and sanitary restaurant and enjoy these dishes which have for centuries been the favorites of the colorful Mexican country." Around the same time, Tomás met his future wife, Lupe, who worked as a nanny for the family of his partner, Albert Chazaro.

The Chazaro family rented a home on Prytania Street in the Lower Garden District, listed Lupe as a "servant" in the 1930 census.[37] Lupe arrived to New Orleans with their family on August 29, 1929 onboard the United Fruit Company's Sinaloa ship, which stopped in Veracruz en route to New Orleans from Honduras.[38] Lupe cared for the three youngest Chazaro children, Silvio, Dolores, and Elsie. Albert, the oldest son, worked briefly as a clerk with A.E. Hegewisch, a conservative-leaning freighting company with headquarters in Veracruz and New Orleans.

Albert eventually became Tomás's partner opening up Chapultepec Restaurant in 1931 in the Central Business District (CBD); they hired Lupe to help out in the kitchen. Tomás and Lupe's grandson, Tommy, reflected fondly on Lupe's hard work ethic, describing her daily schedule before marrying Tomás: "She'd get up in the morning, get the [Chazaro] kids up, cook breakfast for the family, then start the laundry, get lunch fixed for them, then once lunch was fixed, go to the streetcar on St. Charles, because she lived right there, take the streetcar down to Chapultepec because it was on St. Charles in

the CBD, work lunch service, do prep for dinner, and then take the streetcar back, fix dinner, clean the house, and then just do it over and over again."

When Lupe worked for Tomás, they went on a few dates, despite a large age gap. But as the Chazaro children grew up, Lupe was no longer needed and she yearned to go back to her family in her small town of Tlacotalpan, Veracruz. Tommy and Karen explained that when Tomás found out that Lupe was on her way to the port to return to Veracruz, he tracked her down. According to their narrative, Tomás "kidnapped" Lupe against her will, convincing her to stay with him in New Orleans. Lupe, seemingly with no other choice, stayed in New Orleans, marrying Tomás soon after. Together, Tomás and Lupe opened El Ranchito on Elysian Fields in 1946, running the restaurant until Tomás's retirement in 1973. He died three years later at the age of 91. Lupe, also called "Lupita," continued selling food informally out of her house, making tamales and daily plates of food by request.

In 2015, I visited Tomás and Lupe's grandchildren, Karen and Tommy, in the suburbs of New Orleans, in their rented commissary space where they prepare tamales daily. In 2010, Karen and Tommy began operating Lupita's Hot Tamales, naming the operation after their beloved grandmother, Lupe. The siblings, who admit sheepishly to speaking little Spanish, grew up visiting their grandparents' restaurant, El Ranchito. Karen and Tommy credited their grandparents' success to their versatility in the kitchen. Karen explained that the food at El Ranchito featured more New Orleans-style dishes because in "New Orleans [people] always wanted everything to be deep-fried." Instead of making traditional Mexican dishes like *pescado a la veracruzana* (Veracruz style fish), they just made fried catfish to attract the New Orleans based clientele. When I asked how

Tomás gained so much access to the media, Karen said: “He could speak English well and he wore fancy suits. He could blend in with lawyers and get attention that way.” Karen and Tommy told me that they have a limited recollection of Tomás, other than his reputation as an aging lothario and his ability to charm most people. Tomás passed away in 1976 at age 91, when they were just eight and ten years old.

But the two siblings always remained close to their grandmother, who died in 2007 at the age of 105. Reflecting back on her time with her grandmother, Karen explained that she and her cousins initially had no idea what to get Lupita for her one-hundredth birthday, but that they recalled how much Lupita enjoyed talking about her hometown Festival of Candelaria. Veracruz, like New Orleans, is known for its festivals and the Festival of the Candelaria is an annual parade celebrated in February dedicated to the patron saint of the coastal town of Tlacotalpan. The festival features a large procession with ornate floats and a ten-foot statue of the Virgin of Candelaria that parades down an amphibious route, through cobble stone streets and on rafts down the Papaloapan River. Karen, Tommy, and their cousins decided that all of the grandchildren would pool their money to take one-hundred-year-old Lupita to Tlacotalpan for the festival. In January 2001, Karen, Lupita, and their cousin left for a two-week venture in Veracruz. Karen had never been to Mexico and it was Lupita’s first time returning to the area since the 1970s.

In Tlacotalpan they stayed with the Chazaro children that Lupita had helped raise in New Orleans. “I got to see all the young people that she raised and are (now) in their eighties,” said Karen. “The Chazaro family is the wealthiest family in town,” said Karen, “and they live in the biggest house in the center of town” with “Italian marble on the

floor." They spent much of their time with the Chazaro family and Karen said that Lupita remembered all the old family stories. She said, "she told one about Mr. Chazaro being kidnapped during the revolution and she had to go deliver the money for ransom, the silver pieces." Karen said that the Chazaro children didn't remember many of these stories, but one-hundred-year-old Lupita could recall every detail, "even though she didn't know what she had for lunch."

They also visited Lupita's family while in Tlacotalpan, but her family was much poorer and lived in "cinderblock houses" so they couldn't stay with them because there wasn't enough space. "Lupita wasn't a rich woman," Karen recalled, "but to them (her family), she was the one that got away…because to them she made it (in New Orleans)." Karen explained, "she had this life, to be able to own her own business and work hard and be able to provide for her own family when none of her own family ever left (Tlacotalpan)." Lupita had two sisters that had traveled to the United States, and one of the sisters was still alive. But rest of the family remained in Veracruz. Karen said that she was able to connect with some of her cousins in Tlacotalpan, despite the language barrier. Karen said that she had sent clothes to her family in the past, but never really imagined what life was like there for her cousins. These transnational stories between Lupita, her family, and the Chazaros illustrate the ties between New Orleans and Veracruz. They show how Lupita was able to start from a "servant" doing low-wage work to establishing her own business. They also show the affection that Tommy and Karen had for their grandmother.

In 2010, three years after Lupita's death, the siblings decided to carry on their family tradition and open up their own tamale business. Tommy had experience. He

studied Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Administration at the University of New Orleans and always had a penchant for the kitchen. After Katrina, he worked in construction as a contractor but quickly decided to return to work as a sous-chef in the restaurant industry. Tommy said that a friend that owned a restaurant sought him out, saying that they needed someone that could cook well and that they could rely on. Plus, he said, they "threw a lot of money at me and (I) couldn't turn it down." However, in 2010, when the B.P. oil spill devastated the seafood industry, Tommy's boss told him that he "couldn't make any money selling roast beef po-boys." He informed Tommy that he had to let him go, but wrote Tommy a three-week severance check. With that money, Tommy went to his mother and his sister with the idea to make and sell tamales on the streets. He said, "I told them I would go out and buy all the stuff and that day we made 75 dozen tamales." He said that Karen got on Facebook and advertised to all their friends, "Remember Lupita's tamales? We are selling them today." In one day, they sold all the tamales for ten dollars per dozen. That was the start of their business.

Tommy credited his grandfather's time living in the Mississippi Delta and Mexico as the main influences in Tomás's version of tamales, but he maintains that it was his grandmother, Lupe, who perfected the recipe. Much of the credit for the restaurant and food success went to Tomás, but the Lupita clearly played a major role as a cultural producer. Karen explained, "We had made Lupita's tamales, but we had never done it solo, without her." The siblings were lucky that Lupita wrote down the exact measurements of her tamales before she passed away in 2007, but Karen said it was the old customers from El Ranchito that helped them to perfect the recipe, "they wanted the

same texture, same taste, same heat." But Tommy chimed in saying that they make their tamales a little hotter and "a lot of bigger" than Lupita's original recipe.

Nowadays, they roll approximately 300-400 tamales a week and sell them for fourteen dollars per dozen. Eventually Tommy talked his mother into buying a $600 machine to standardize the production of the tamales to make it easier to mass-produce the tamales. Karen said that it wasn't until 2014 that she and Tommy each committed fulltime to making tamales. Tommy converted his garage into a kitchen and they cooked out of the garage for the first months, but then they found the space in the commissary. Karen said that she initially feared giving up her hair styling business because she, as a single mother of one daughter, could not take financial risks. Since she and Tommy made the move to full-time over a year ago, they have already invested in a food truck where they can eventually make their own tamales and distribute them throughout the area. Tommy and Karen say that they do not see a brick and mortar restaurant in their future; rather, they would like to mass-produce tamales to be sold and distributed in groceries on a larger scale.

Similarly, the grandchildren of Miguel Fernandez, Tomás's early competitor, carried on the traditions of their grandfather after his death in 1968. Miguel's business started with a pushcart in 1933, to opening his own brick and mortar space, Miguel's Hot Tamales, on Carrollton Avenue in 1960. By the time of his death in 1968, the business had grown to six distributors. Over the next decade, Miguel's Hot Tamales continued business, increasing distribution to fifteen locations in New Orleans. The business prospered over the next twenty years with Manual's children and grandchildren at the helm. After Katrina, floods devastated the business, destroying $200,000 worth of

equipment. The family opted to sell the building and equipment rather than rebuild. The Lemonade Parade business opened up in its place in 2013, serving a version of Miguel's Hot Tamales alongside frozen lemonade, hotdogs, and nachos. But the business closed in 2015.

Tomás, Lupita, and Manual's respective legacies as represented through their enduring family businesses demonstrates not only the ongoing appeal of tamales in New Orleans, but also the resurgence of street food vending. Tommy left his work in the construction industry and Karen left her work in the formal sector as a hairstylist. Yet, as they enter this street vending economy, their work tiptoes the line between informal and formal sector. They have a formal commissary kitchen where they meet each day to prepare their recipe; either Karen or Tommy posts their route on social media to let their clients know where they will be; they have one or two people that work consistently with them to help with the production. Then, they go out on the streets to sell their days' supply. This regimen is strict; their business is licensed, thus they blur the lines between these sectors.

The Fernandez family also underscores the relevance of immigration status in regards to the visibility and recognition of their business. Like other itinerant (though unlicensed) tamale vendors, Lupita's Hot Tamales seeks to make their product available to larger crowds through the mobility of their services. Tommy and Karen's status a third generation Mexican-Americans allows for this mobility and visibility. They were easily able to get a business license; drive a car legally; and, can openly advertise their location without fear of being targeted. At times they operate in areas that are restricted, like in St. Bernard Parish and parts of Jefferson Parish, but Tommy and Karen don't fear being

deported for a lack of license; rather they get ticketed or are able to talk their way out of a fine.

In this sense, their mobility is unlimited. Even their equipment gives them an advantage: Karen and Tommy latch a large insulated warmer to the back of their pick up truck. The portable stainless steel warmer opens from the top and is decorated with the yellow, red, and green logo with the menu items listed. It is tasteful, yet flashy, meant to draw attention from new customers. Their logo, a caricature of Lupita's face, is featured on their truck and on their Facebook page. They post daily on this account to let their customers know their whereabouts—in parking lots in New Orleans, Metairie, Slidell, Chalmette, Marrero. Their legal status begets their mobility and visibility. But, undocumented tamale vendors, like Clara, Leonora, Alejandro, and the women at the Ideal Market, face a much more precarious position selling food on the streets. While they thrive in public spaces, they must stay out of the public eye and in the shadows. These safeguards limit their profitability, mobility and visibility, bounding them to church grounds and spaces occupied by clientele with similar class and immigration statuses. Cultural status is tied to immigration status in terms of mobility, marketability, and legitimacy.

Clara and Leonora: The Dueling Tamale Vendors

For almost two years, a church sidewalk served as the metaphorical line in the sand between the two tamale-slinging entrepreneurs, Clara and Leonora, as they sold food at separate booths outside of the weekly meetings of the Congress of Day Laborers. Beginning in 2012, Clara and Leonora arrived early to the meetings each evening, setting up their respective booths featuring similar Honduran foods—*tamales*, *baleadas*,

taquitos, *chimol, pollo con tajadas,* and *yucca con chicharron.* As the two women assembled their spaces, they made no eye contact with each other, operating as if the other wasn't there. Clara and Leonora both spent the previous twenty-four hours preparing their foods to sell, with some help from family members. Each woman loaded their cars with the prepared foods and necessary supplies, transporting their goods to the Mid-City neighborhood. "It takes four to five hours to make the tamales," explained Clara, "I make the tamales the night before and leave them prepared. I make the rest of the food the day of the meeting. I fry the chicken last. I do this every Tuesday and Wednesday; I have to, to make extra money for my family." Each booth consisted of a table with the prepared products in giant stainless steel pots, crockpots, and baskets; a canopy tent sometimes covered their tables for rainy New Orleans nights. Each week, Clara and Leonora lured in customers by bellowing the foods they offered, often trying to eclipse each other to win over clientele. Men, women and children stood around their vending areas to purchase dinner or snacks. Loyalties abounded, as the same people tended to frequent the same stand each week.

Clara and Leonora's food vending experiences parallel the growth of the Congress of Day Laborers. During my six years working with this group, it expanded from around forty members to approximately 200 members that attend the weekly meeting. In the early stages, food was provided for meeting attendees, paid for by the Congress of Day Laborers. The food selection alternated between Domino's Pizza and catering from Luz, a Mexican woman, who brought trays of stewed beef, rice, spicy salsa verde, and a mayonnaise-based iceberg lettuce salad. Part of my duty each week (aside from transporting people to and from the meetings) was to order food for the members.

Free food helped bring people to the meetings, filling the stomachs of many who were unable to afford three meals a day due to low wages and limited work.

When I began volunteering with this group in 2011, the face of the typical Congress of Day Laborer member was masculine; however, in the last five years the demographic shifted to include more women and children. As the number of members and children grew, so did the demand for a more efficient and economic way to feed people. Both Leonora and Clara started selling food to members after the meetings to supplement the limited amount of food that Luz made. Gradually, the Congress of Day Laborers shifted to only having Leonora and Clara selling food at the meetings; Luz's services were no longer needed. But as Clara and Leonora's demand increased, so did the tensions between the two women. When the organizers for the Congress of Day Laborers received complaints from both vendors, they decided they no longer wanted to play mediator and asked each vendor to alternate weeks. Leonora agreed to the arrangement; Clara opted out, initially. After a couple of weeks she changed her mind, realizing the importance of the income to help support her large family. While the menu items and style of vending make Leonora and Clara's enterprises similar, their distinct pathways that led them to selling food differ. Their respective experiences with immigration policy and their duties to family help elucidate the challenges migrants face in accessing space and place in the broader political economy.

Clara

Clara works off and on as a housekeeper in the hotel industry. Selling food complements her work off and on in the service industry, illustrating the difficulties individuals face in making ends meet while working low-wage service jobs. Clara arrived

directly to New Orleans, from Honduras in 2006, working as a hotel housekeeper for nine years. She has sold food since 2013, almost exclusively at the Congress Day Laborer meetings. Clara does not have a mobile vendor permit, because these types of licensing are limited for the undocumented community. Language barriers, misinformation, tax issues, and quotas oftentimes prevent undocumented people from even attempting these bureaucratic processes. While there is no specification that a person must be a U.S. citizen in order to officially license their business, oftentimes, undocumented individuals *prefer* to remain in the shadows to avoid having their name and business registered with the city/state. Their undocumented status begets their clandestine enterprises; informal economies become the central, reflecting the vulnerable state of these community and the unsustainable nature of the neoliberal economy.

Figure 5: Clara sells food in Mid-City during a New Orleans-based Honduran political protest in 2015. Photo taken by Sarah Fouts.

Originally from Honduras, Clara arrived to New Orleans in 2007. She is the mother of five children and has one grandchild. Clara and her three oldest children are undocumented. Clara speaks Spanish with limited English and is the sole breadwinner for her family. She has minimal contact and little support from the children's father. Her oldest child was born in 1998 and her youngest child was born in 2015. Two of Clara's children were born in New Orleans, granting them U.S. citizenship. The other three

arrived as unaccompanied minors in 2013, joining their mother in New Orleans. Clara receives a monthly Electronic Benefits Transferred (EBT) card through the Louisiana Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program to help take care of her youngest son. Her oldest daughter also receives WIC benefits for her child who was also born in 2015. These government aids are minimal, but they help offset some costs.

Her three oldest children were among the 100,000 unaccompanied minors that arrived in the United States from Central America in the last four years.[39] Clara paid a coyote over $10,000 to bring her three children on the long journey from northeastern Honduras to New Orleans through the Mexico border. Clara explained that she had to get her older children out of Honduras because of the extreme violence in the country, which has one of the highest murder rates in the world.[40] Plus, she wanted to be with her children. Her undocumented children have some potential recourse through their asylum applications due to the extreme conditions they face in Honduras. I did not grasp the urgency of their situation until I visited her family in northeastern Honduras in 2015.

To get to Clara's mother's house in eastern Honduras, I took a dusty six-hour ride on a refurbished yellow school bus packed shoulder-to-shoulder with commuters more accustomed to the bumpy dirt roads. I first arrived in a town called Olanchito, where her ex-husband's mother and brother drove me for approximately two hours along a windy mountain road leading to the town center of Esquipulas del Norte. Although it was another long haul, their clean and spacious 1998 Toyota Four-Runner offered relief from the bumpy ride on the yellow bus. In Clara's absence, her mother-in-law raised her three children on her small farm near the town of Tocoa. Once narco-traffickers took over the

area, it was no longer safe for her teenage children. When a relative was killed on the family farm, the threat of further violence forced the children to flee for their safety, joining their mother and two younger brothers in New Orleans.

Once we arrived in Esquipulas del Norte, Clara's in-laws informed me that Clara's mother lived another hour outside of the town center, but that was a far as they could take me. To get the rest of the way, I hitched a ride with Don Chicho, a stout and gregarious man, driving a small pick-up truck. Along the way, Don Chicho told me about his ambitions to run for mayor of Esquipulas del Norte. As we approached a river, he explained that under his mayoral term he planned to build a bridge across the river. Before I could ask what people do in the meantime, his truck entered the water and forded the river. I watched as water reached the door handle of the car, but Chicho assured me that he makes the ride multiple times per day. We crossed safely, and after another half hour, we arrived at Clara's mother, Doña Minerva's house. Located at the end of a small dirt road, Doña Minerva's home sat at the base of a hill in a small, verdant community surrounded by small farms, banana trees, and coffee plants growing throughout the rolling hills. She lived on the outskirts of the outskirts.

Clara is one of eight children, four of which live in the United States. Clara's mother and stepfather own a three-room shack with dirt floors and no electricity. I slept in a bed in a small area sectioned off with tarps as makeshift walls, dividing the five other beds from one another in the house. I was in Esquipulas del Norte in the heart of bean harvesting season. Clara's family used the remittances she sent to purchase a modest plot consisting of 80-90 blocks of land. The money earned from three harvests of beans annually barely keeps the family afloat. Doña Minerva informed me that the men earn

between 100 to 120 *lempiras* each day during harvest season, which translates to approximately five dollars per day. Clara's sister's husband and his brothers were in town that month to harvest beans from the family's plot. The four young men slept on the dirt floor of the house on top of potato sacks, just on the other side of my tarp. They woke up around 4:30 a.m. to work and arrived home around 9 p.m. Upon their return, the men spent the next two hours cleaning the beans they harvested and prepared their tools for the next day's work. While they did this, Doña Minerva, her youngest daughter, and granddaughter, prepared dinner—handmade tortillas, and fresh beans from the harvest. As a guest, I was offered canned sardines and cheese as a supplement. One day, as a treat for lunch, Doña Minerva slaughtered and cooked one of her chickens from the yard to make a homemade stew.

Doña Minerva's house is equipped for electricity, but she told me that they did not have enough money to pay the bills. Doña Minerva used to work outside her home cleaning houses, ironing clothes, and selling tamales, until she was diagnosed with osteoporosis in 2013. Now she can barely keep up the work in her own home—cooking, cleaning, and raising her grandchildren. She said that her two daughters in the United States, Clara and Daria, do not send much money to Honduras because they have their own families to take care of in New Orleans. Clara corroborated that statement, telling me that since she had her most recent child, she has been unable to work in the hotel because she cannot find someone to take care of the baby. She said that when she does work in the hotel, she sends money once or twice a month. Doña Minerva is raising two of Clara's nieces and nephews. Her sister, Daria was forced to leave them behind five years ago when she moved to New Orleans to do construction work. Daria now has three

children born in the United States and continues to work tiling floors in renovated homes. She sends money when she is able. Like many of the families I visited in Honduras, Doña Minerva wanted to send back a gift to her family in the United States. Daria and Clara had sent me with candy, shoes, old cell phones, and about $100 in cash. Doña Minerva sent me back with a sack of freshly harvested beans, the only material item she could afford. She assured me that Clara would be excited to see the fruits of her remittances. When I gave them to Clara upon my return from Honduras, she beamed with excitement.

At the end of my interview with Clara, she said that she would ultimately like to return to Honduras, but it is not possible considering the poverty and violence. She said that she is happy in New Orleans and that her "kids are in good schools, getting a good education and have more opportunities." Clara said that she would like to open her own restaurant with her sister to be able to consistently sell her foods to people, but lamented, "that day is far in the future." In the spring of 2016 Clara purchased a taco truck to expand her business. She found a used truck for a low price, but she has to wait until she has the time and money to invest in it to clean it up. "I want to put it right in front of my house on Jefferson Davis Avenue, and set out a few tables and chairs," she told me. Before she can run her operation out of a truck, she must get all the adequate licensing, a feat that is difficult (but not impossible) for someone that is undocumented. Part of the process is to find someone that has a Louisiana drivers' license in order to get the correct business license. "I am waiting for my son to get his license," she said, "then I can open the truck." Her three oldest children are in the process of petitioning for asylum, but it

could take another year. The last I checked, the taco truck was still sitting unused in the lot near her house.

The precarious nature of Clara's business—operating without a license as an undocumented person—illustrates the challenges many individuals face, particularly women. The rise in the informal economy adds an extra precariousness, yet it also allows her to take care of her children with a more flexible schedule than her fulltime work in the hotel industry. At the same time, entrepreneurial pursuits like these are often the only lucrative jobs in a limited economy, thus illustrating how neoliberal policies have devastated the formal sector through deregulation and the degradation of labor. In New Orleans and elsewhere, informal economies like Clara's are increasingly ubiquitous, providing extra money in order to help individuals and families make ends meet. This informal sector has become central to the economy as a method by the state to shift away responsibilities of the public sector onto the backs of the people, especially low income and already disenfranchised groups.

Leonora

Leonora was born in 1969 in Juticalpa, Honduras, the capital city of the department of Olancho, located in the central part of the country. Leonora is from a small city, approximately 150 miles from Clara's family. Throughout her youth, Leonora bounced between Juticalpa and the port town of La Ceiba, spending most of her time learning to cook coastal foods typical of that region. When Leonora was in her early twenties, she followed friends and relatives northward up the coast near Mango Creek, Belize to work as a housekeeper and in a restaurant. In Belize, she had an established community, family, and a home, but, like many, she still desired to go the United States

to make more money. After Hurricane Mitch devastated the region in 1998, jobs were scarce because of damage done to the tourism industry and the overall infrastructure. Soon after, Leonora moved to the United States, first in Philadelphia, where she had a network of friends living in the area. In Philadelphia she worked in multiple kitchens, ranging from fast food chains to a Mexican restaurant. She alternated between cooking and doing dishes, but always yearned to make her own food. While living in Philadelphia, Leonora met her husband, Pedro. Pedro is a U.S. citizen, born and raised in Puerto Rico. Pedro is also a U.S. Army veteran, having served for twenty years before being honorably discharged. Because of his veteran status, Pedro earns a pension with decent benefits. And, Pedro is bilingual. After living in Philadelphia, Pedro and Leonora decided they wanted a change of pace, so they moved back to Belize where they purchased a home and ran a small restaurant. Both Leonora and Pedro have grown children from previous marriages.

Figure 6: Leonora preparing *pollo con tajadas* at a Congress of Day Laborers meeting. Photo taken by Fernando Lopez.

Pedro and Leonora lived comfortably in a small coastal town until Pedro was diagnosed with cancer. They maintained their home in Belize, but moved to the United States where Pedro could get better medical care using his veteran's benefits. They settled down in New Orleans where Leonora's brother had made his home after Katrina. Leonora procured a catering license through a friend that owns a restaurant in New

Orleans. In 2015, Leonora received notice that she received her green card through her marriage to Pedro. She could finally work in the United States legally, providing her much more mobility to navigate the bureaucratic systems of the city, especially compared to Clara. Because of her legal status, she can access various resources in New Orleans, from healthcare to a driver's license. Further, Pedro and Leonora help raise two grandchildren, but their children are no longer dependent on them. While they are not without their challenges (especially considering Pedro's ailing state), they can navigate the city with more mobility and less fear.

In August 2014, I ran into Leonora as she sold food at the Pelican Soccer league, a semi-professional soccer league for Latinx teams located in the back of New Orleans' City Park. Leonora used to sell food there on the weekends. To get to the Pelican League fields you must cross over a bridge, beyond one of several lagoons in City Park and pay a $5 entrance fee. In a sense, the fields are a microcosm of the Latinx population in New Orleans—hidden in the periphery of the city, yet thriving with culture, orderliness, and efficiency. Central American and Mexican *futbolistas* play on two adjacent fields with official jerseys and a licensed referees. Fans fill the metal bleachers and sit on blankets in the grass cheering on their favorite team. Doña Mirna, a Honduran woman who has been in the United States since the early 1980s, sells food from a tent at the first field. DJs from the local radio station and representatives from the Spanish-language newspaper, *Jambalaya*, each have booths set up advertising their respective media.

When I first saw Leonora at the soccer fields, she pulled a cart, serving a limited menu of just Honduran tamales, bottled water, and soda to the many spectators and players in attendance. Since 2011, Leonora sold food at the park most Sundays after

church. But, when I asked her recently about her food vending at the Pelican League, she said that she no longer sells food there because she lost her place at the fields. She didn't elaborate further, but she insinuated that she had been bumped out of her vending spot. Clearly some overarching system within that hidden soccer league has been established to regulate who can sell food and when, illustrating how this community devised these de facto systems and structures as their form of legitimization. Leonora compensates for her lost spot at the Pelican League by picking up various gigs across the city, oftentimes at church events or small festivals. I try to help Leonora and Clara when I can, by sending them gigs when I come across them.

For example, in February of 2016, the organizers of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival approached me to see if I knew of anyone who could make Belizean food. That year, the festival, which occurs annually during the last weekend in April and the first weekend in May, featured the music and food culture of Belize, integrated throughout the event. The organizer for the Cultural Exchange Pavilion at the festival wanted someone who could cook Belizean food to sell during the ten-day period. With over 400,000 people in anticipated attendance, it seemed like a great opportunity. I immediately thought of Leonora and suggested her for the job. I was transparent throughout the process, emphasizing that Leonora is actually from Honduras, but spent around twenty years living in Belize. I knew that Leonora often served Belizean-styled dishes, including *dukunu*, a sweeter, smaller version of a tamale and coconut-based soups. She was well acquainted with the food and culture of Belize.

When I mentioned the event to Leonora and Pedro, they were excited, mostly asking about the potential profit, failing to also recognize the cultural value of their labor.

I had to unpack the importance of the cultural exchange aspect of the event, but assured them it would be lucrative. For Leonora and Pedro, cultural production is their livelihood. Being on stage seemed, understandably, much less enticing than the highly sought booth amid 400,000 attendees. I reinforced the context, formality, and magnitude of the event to Leonora and Pedro, who had never been. We arranged to meet the organizer at a coffee shop. Even though Pedro speaks fluent English and Spanish, I convinced him to let me interpret. In a previous meeting, I had notice that he had left out some key details while conveying ideas to Leonora. As we sat at a table in the coffee shop, the organizer explained her vision—Leonora would serve food from a booth and conduct a demonstration of how to make a typical Belizean food item. I translated for Leonora as she and Pedro listened eagerly. The organizer explained that the booth would be a one-time event and referenced the long waiting list of vendors that seek to sell food at Jazz Fest. They understood it was a privilege. For Leonora and Pedro, the Jazz Fest booth was a moneymaking venture. For the organizer, their presence was cultural. This disconnect illustrates how Leonora and Pedro *and* organizer recognized culture and work as two separate entities, rather than considering culture and work as a endless partnership.

At the meeting, we first focused on the logistics of booth vending. The organizer suggested that Leonora and Pedro would need a large crew of workers to help operate the booth for the ten-day festival. Leonora said that her small crew of four to five people would suffice, wanting to keep the overhead low and the jobs limited to her family. The organizer asked about licensing. Leonora explained that she had a catering license, which she utilized to sell food at the Lafreniere Park Festival, an annual festival in the Metairie suburb. Because of the vast size of the event, the organizer said that Leonora would need

to be affiliated with a restaurant, which would also be a crucial part for the application process for the booth vendor committee. The red tape began.

The organizer said she could help expedite the process to apply for a booth, prioritizing their enterprise this one time because they would sell Belizean food. They were the only ones in town, to our knowledge, with this ability. Leonora and Pedro would need a formal proposal to submit for the vending application. I agreed to help them, but they had to seek out the restaurant with which to partner. They pondered for a bit, spitballing ideas on what restaurant could work and agreeing to check back in with me in the next couple of weeks. We then discussed the cooking demo. This process seemed much more cut and dry, but not lucrative. Leonora and Pedro were less interested. But, Leonora cast some ideas on foods that she could prepare for the crowd, stirring some excitement to be on stage making these dishes. Leonora, Pedro, and I agreed to craft a proposal to submit to the vendor committee. We set a time to meet back with the organizer in two weeks.

About one week passed and I hadn't heard yet from Leonora and Pedro about their progress. In the meantime I found a template for the vendor application and started filling it out based on the notes I had during the meeting—menu items, prices, etc. That week, I ran into Leonora at the Congress of Day Laborer meeting; it was her turn to sell food. I could tell she was too busy to talk to me while she served plates of food to her customers, so I spoke with Pedro. He said he had planned to call me earlier in the week, but had forgotten; they had bad news. He explained that they inquired with the preacher of their Jehovah Witness Church about potential restaurants. They wanted to see if he had any recommendations on restaurants to partner with, knowing all along that the

preacher's brother owned a Honduran restaurant in Kenner. But when they mentioned the prospect of selling food at the festival, their preacher pointed out that selling food in a place like Jazz Fest is prohibited based on their church's principles—Jehovah Witnesses frown upon excessive drinking and dancing. Along with countless fedora hats and inexorable heat, drinking and dancing are mainstays of Jazz Fest. They couldn't participate. I could see the disappointment in Pedro's face. He kept insisting it was "her" church. But, it seemed like the religion was just one of many hurdles in actually realizing the booth at the festival.

That experience with Leonora and Pedro helped elucidate the cultural barriers to these economies, beyond just what is forbidden by religion. Going through that process highlighted the distinctions between cultural exchange and livelihood; family and employees; formal applications and spontaneous hustles; legality and bureaucracy; practicality and profit. When I interpreted for Leonora, I was really interpreting to both Leonora *and* Pedro, attempting to make legible the massive cultural bureaucracy surrounding Jazz Fest—the manufacturing of cultural images, the pandering to tourists, the overpriced tickets, etc. I wanted to tell Leonora and Pedro to just sit outside the Jazz Fest gates to sell their foods, shirking the bureaucracy and joining the hundreds of the Fair Grounds neighborhood locals that set up their own hustles outside their homes—grills with mounds of meat, makeshift bars with stiff drinks, and even $1 bathroom entries in private homes. That's integration.

Conclusion

Comparing the cases of Clara and Leonora with Tomás, Lupita, and their grandchildren provides a glimpse into the shifting experiences of first generation and the

increasing role of the informal sector in the political economy. Like many migrants in the United States, Tomás, Lupita, Clara and Leonora each arrived to United States to fill a depleted labor force. During the first half of the twentieth century Tomás came to the United States to work on the railroads and Lupita came as a nanny. Almost a century later, Clara and Leonora joined thousands of Latinx workers to fulfill necessary jobs in construction and domestic labor after Katrina. They all left this formal sector to embark on their own enterprises. And like Clara and Leonora, Lupita and Tomás were able to build their own food vending businesses, establishing their own cultural and economic niches in a city dominated by Creole and Cajun cuisines.

What sets them apart beyond the half-century divide of their existence is the legality of their presence in the United States. In the late 1920s, the years of Tomás's early tenure as a tamale vendor on Canal Street, quotas did not exist under the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 for Mexicans and other immigrants from the Western Hemisphere.[41] People could come and go, for the most part, as they pleased across the Mexican border or through the Port of New Orleans, only paying a head tax to enter into the United States. Mexicans that arrived by boat through the port of New Orleans (rather than crossing U.S./Mexico border like Clara and Leonora) enjoyed a somewhat more privileged integration because they were considered more like European (whiter) immigrants and associated with the thriving trade business.[42] Moreover, when he was arrested in 1928 for street peddling, Tomás did not fear that he would be deported and sent back to Mexico; rather, Tomás was slapped with a fine and released from jail, pushing him to legitimize his enterprise with bricks and mortar. As a result, Tomás and

Lupita were able to leave a lasting cultural legacy of tamale entrepreneurship for their children and grandchildren.

On the contrary, because of their fragile legal status, undocumented workers like Clara face much harsher repercussions—if caught selling tamales, these vendors could be arrested and deported. U.S. immigration law has increasingly become more restrictive, as record deportations have led to well over two million deportations from 2008 to 2015. From a cracked front windshield to selling tamales on the street, undocumented individuals have been disproportionately arrested and sent through the deportation processes for minor offenses. Due to these strict policies, thousands of parents have been separated from their families, despite having laid long established roots in the United States. Limitations—like documentation status and lack of licensing—prevent her mobility and visibility.

Clara and Leonora's contemporaries, Tommy and Karen, built on the legacy of their grandparents to have access to political, cultural, and financial capital. While Tommy and Karen sell tamales, their documentation status, language abilities, and cultural legacy allow them more mobility. As their method of vending food and their product match the methods and types of products that Clara sells, their status as U.S. citizens and third generation Mexican-Americans (English-speaking), allow Tommy and Karen the access to open a thriving business in public spaces. Like Clara and Leonora, Karen and Tommy sell their foods on the streets, sometimes defying the parameters set by the New Orleans city ordinances. Like Clara and Leonora, Karen and Tommy have been asked by law enforcement to not vend their food in prohibited areas. But, unlike Clara and Leonora, Karen and Tommy's business is legitimized in the eyes of the state

because they have a name, a license, a logo, and a marketing strategy that allows them to publically advertise their products to the masses. Clara, who does not have a formal permit, falls into a more precarious situation in which her informal economy is limited to the shadows of the city. Like many other undocumented food vendors in the city, she must keep a low profile.

New Orleans' history is rife with immigrant stories like that of Tomás and Lupita. Newer narratives of post-Katrina street food vendors, like Clara and Leonora, continue to emerge illustrating the cultural continuity and the dynamism of these transnational stories. Clara and Leonora are their own bosses and they oftentimes make their own rules and set their own schedules. This versatility allows them to stay at home when children are not in school or when their husband is sick. It allows them to bring their children along with them to work. It allows them to vend food on the street as extra income to supplement a job they may have in the formal sector. In this sense, these jobs are sites of resistance in that they reject the low-wage jobs that are available, but fail to provide the versatility and flexibility that these individuals need. It is this paradox of regulation, one that targets street vendors for shirking the system, but does not regulate the formal sector to ensure that they provide sufficient pay and benefits for workers so they do not have to opt out of this sector. It is within this freewheeling, deregulated neoliberal society that the innocuous tamale vendor is arrested and threatened for deportation and the exploitative boss is lionized as a job creator.

Chapter Three:

Street Legal: Tacos Trucks, Changing Circumstances, and Shifting Policies

“Bourbon Kitchen Cruise” is the name of a Mexican-owned *lonchera* (taco truck/trailer) that sits under the Highway-90 bridge, off Earhart Avenue in the shadows of the Superdome. It is the second of two trucks owned by Francisco and Dulce, who arrived to New Orleans from Houston after Katrina. A purple, gold, and green vinyl sign wraps around the front window of the white self-propelled truck, depicting a Mardi Gras mask and beads. The driver side of the *lonchera* features large images of New Orleans staples like crawfish *etouffee* and creole shrimp. Two black and gold *fleur de lis*, the symbol of New Orleans, are pasted on either door of the *lonchera*, which is positioned strategically across from a Home Depot Store. Uptown Recycling, a run-down warehouse that gives cash for scrap copper and other metals, flanks the north side of the truck. The rest of the lot is barren, with only a few cars usually parked under the bridge.

Behind the *lonchera*, a white plastic table and three chairs provide a place for customers to sit and eat their food. The *lonchera* is situated in a convenient spot, in an industrial part of town with quick access to the highway and to major streets like Claiborne, Earhart, and St. Charles Avenues. It is easy to miss, as it sits back off the road about a hundred feet. Just a half-mile away is the Martin Luther King Jr. and Claiborne Avenue day laborer *esquina,* a transitional site easily accessed by contractors and day

laborers looking for employment. Ten to twenty men congregate there daily, waiting to be recruited for a job or to meet an employer for transportation. The truck is run by Honduran workers, but the owners are Mexican and serve food to a predominantly Latinx clientele. While the imagery on the truck captures the iconic images and colors of the city, at the same time, the truck represents shifting New Orleans food scene.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, newly arrived *loncheras* provided an invaluable and overlooked service, offering low-priced food as a satisfying alternative to the FEMA-issued "Meals Ready to Eat" (MREs). Food options were limited due to citywide power outages, water shortages, abandoned restaurants, and empty grocery stores. Since September 2005, these mobile vendors have expanded significantly as they continue to serve construction workers and increasingly cater to growing food truck popularity. Food trucks continue to appear in New Orleans with names like Taqueria Aguila, Taqueria Muy Rica, Taqueria El Gato, Taqueria Sanchez, and Taqueria Chilangos, indicating the permanence of this Spanish-speaking population. At the same time, gourmet food trucks—with clever names like Empanada Intifada, Rolling Fatties, and Taceaux Loceaux—emerged on the scene fitting within the national trend of hip food trucks with fusion foods and sleek branding, representing an expanding young urban professional class. Convenience, mobility, high demands, and low overhead lured these entrepreneurs into the food truck business; in some cases, local policies hindered their successes. The aim of this chapter is not to juxtapose gourmet trucks with *loncheras*; rather, I situate the experiences of food truck vendors within the larger political economy of immigration policy and food truck policy. To tell this story without including the concomitant rise in gourmet vendors would be amiss.

The growth and development of food trucks in New Orleans varies for different people based on access to social, financial, political, and cultural capital. Some food truck owners are New Orleans natives with local connections who began their trucks as incubators for larger restaurant projects. Some are offshoots of already established restaurants looking to expand through more versatile means. Even Sodexo, the multinational food service corporation with monopolies at all the colleges and universities in New Orleans, has multiple food trucks. Meanwhile, other food truck owners, like Carlos Diaz and the owners of Taqueria Las Palmas, arrived from cities elsewhere in the United States after Katrina, with limited social and cultural capital. Carlos, originally from Brazil, moved to New Orleans from New York City after Katrina with a fleet of food trucks ready to serve the depleted food market.[1] Similarly, the owners

Figure 7: Taqueria Las Ricas sits adjacent to a Lowe's Hardware Store and a day laborer *esquina*. Photo taken by Sarah Fouts.

of Taqueria Las Palmas which parks on the cusp of Orleans and Jefferson Parishes, came from Houston with their taco trailer in tow. In other cases, food trucks like Taqueria Aguila, located in the Central City neighborhood, emerged in a more grassroots way: as a spin-off from tamale vending which earned them enough financial capital to buy their own *lonchera* enterprise.

With a few exceptions, many of the *loncheras* that remain since the storm have established themselves on the periphery of the city—under bridges and in abandoned lots. *Loncheras* oftentimes post up around hardware stores like Lowe's and Home Depot because the majority of their clientele consists of day laborers and contractors who frequent *esquinas* in search for temporary employment. Day laborers and street vendors continually find themselves at odds with the hardware store employees and with the local police over the right to congregate in these spaces. After Katrina, local law enforcement began a system of ticketing workers for violations of trespassing and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) stepped up raids on the *esquinas,* even though the workers, for the most part, convened in public spaces and vendors sold from the street.[2] As ICE agents increasingly patrolled these areas, they indiscriminately targeted workers for their perceived immigration status: undocumented. Understanding these vulnerabilities helps to contextualize why *loncheras* remain in the periphery. They oftentimes *prefer* to be out of plain sight to protect their clientele and their own businesses, which, too, are subjected to pressures by law enforcement and ICE agents for questions around documentation and licensing. In this sense, I argue that the regulation of *loncheras* maps onto the criminalization of the day laborer community through this emphasis on licensing and documentation—on papers.

Since Katrina, food truck vendors—New Orleans natives and people from elsewhere—have experienced significant pushback from public officials throughout the metropolitan New Orleans area. Prior to 2013, food truck vendors encountered opposition from brick and mortar restaurant owners and through restrictive food truck regulations in Orleans Parish that had not been updated since 1956.[3] For example, trucks could only stay in one spot for forty-five minutes, there were only one hundred allotted annual permits, food trucks were prohibited from the Central Business District, and food trucks could not be within six hundred feet of a restaurant.[4] Opposition from organizations like the Louisiana Restaurant Association—citing sanitation issues and unfair tax advantages—helped maintain these archaic laws.[5] These restrictions clearly encumber the practicality, creativity and mobility of food truck owners. The owner of one of the *loncheras* even called the regulations "illogical" and "unfair."

To combat these policies, the New Orleans Food Truck Coalition, a former committee consisting of food truck owners, organized themselves in 2012. Their first goal was to "change the current legislation affecting mobile food vendors in New Orleans to become less restrictive and more supportive of the responsible operation of food trucks in the community."[4] However, when I examined the list of food trucks associated with this coalition, it did not include any of the Honduran or Mexican-owned taco trucks that served the day laborer population. It made me question why this coalition would leave out the voice of the taco truck owners? Or, why would the taco truck owners avoid participation in this coalition? When I asked the former New Orleans Food Truck Coalition president why taco trucks are not represented, he stated that he personally made

multiple efforts to incorporate the voices of the taco truck owners and workers. He said that the individuals he approached preferred to not be involved and some stated that they did not have enough time.

In July 2013, joint efforts by the Food Truck Coalition and the New Orleans City Council came to fruition when a new city ordinance passed, updating the antiquated regulations for food truck vendors. The changes officially went into effect in January 2014 and immediately saw an increase in applications for food truck licensing. The "Food Truck Franchise Guide" on Nola.gov outlines the updated city ordinance stating reasonable restrictions like "mobile food trucks shall not operate within 20 feet of any intersection" and that they cannot operate "3 feet of any public or private driveway." The number of vendor permits designated solely for food trucks expanded to one hundred per year—this number previously entailed licensing of *all* itinerant vendors inclusive of fruit and vegetable stands, tamale vendors, seafood stands, and flower sales. Other policy changes stipulated that food trucks can remain in the same place for up to four hours and regulations allow for motorized vendors to sell on the periphery of the Central Business District. Sales in the French Quarter and Marigny remain prohibited due to the narrow streets. In the *Times-Picayune,* councilmember Stacey Head justified her fight for the food trucks by positing, "Building on the indigenous culture and the talents we have in New Orleans, that's what's going to keep us strong."[6] But was does Head mean by "indigenous culture?" Despite the more liberal policy, Head's rhetoric seems to intentionally ignore the realities of the *loncheras* and the Latinx workers that offer Central American and Mexican foods.

In Jefferson Parish, which makes up the suburban part of the New Orleans metropolitan area, councilmembers took a much harsher stance against food trucks. Just shy of two years after Katrina in June 2007, Jefferson Parish Council passed a ban on food trucks (specifically targeting *loncheras*), even though the parish hosts the highest Latinx population in the state at 13.8%.[7] Councilman Louis Congemi, the leader behind the ban, called the trucks "unsightly remnants of the makeshift conditions" leftover from Katrina.[8] Since Katrina, much of the Latinx population moved to Jefferson Parish because rent is much cheaper and because there was already an established community—the Latinx community first moved from Orleans Parish to Jefferson Parish, during the 1960s and 1970s. The construction of I-10 through Jefferson Parish in the 1950s led to the development of the swamplands and generated rapid population growth, much of which was caused by white flight.[9] Legislators saw this working class Latinx population as a threat to the middle-class suburban status quo. Comments like Congemi's directly link to notions of disposability and undesirability, and fail to contextualize the cultural and economic value of these *loncheras*, and the parish's large Latinx community.

Outrage toward the Jefferson Parish ban spread across the United States, making the national press. Miguel Bustillo in *The Los Angeles Times* captured with aplomb the double standard of the Jefferson Parish policy stating, "In the parking lot of a drive-thru daiquiri bar that sells frozen White Russians in plastic to-go cups, Fidel Sanchez is running an illegal enterprise that's too unwholesome to be tolerated, according to politicians here in suburban Jefferson Parish."[10] This quote criticizes the city council's priorities as they vilify these Latinx food vendors—oftentimes family-run businesses—while overlooking purveyors of portable alcohol. Moreover, Bustillo illustrates how the

city council turns a "blind eye" to the white and black vendors that have long since made a tradition out of selling shrimp on the streets and snowballs out of trucks. Bustillo considers these actions by the city council to be "thick with racial undertones."

Initial statements by the Jefferson Parish Council claimed that food trucks should be banned because they are a zoning violation, an assertion that was shot down by city planners.[11] Local officials in Jefferson Parish also claimed the trucks to be unsanitary, even though the health department reported they found no problems with sanitation.[12] In her work on pollution, Mary Douglass suggests that policy makers pass certain sanitation laws in order to maintain boundaries between groups. Douglass' theory helps to show how the ban aims to set this Latinx population and their culture apart, clearly showing that lawmakers disregarded the long history and important impact of the Latinx communities living in Jefferson Parish.[13]

Likewise, Jeffrey Pilcher, who researches mobile food vendors like the Chili Queens of San Antonio, shows that these anti-immigrant sentiments manifested through food bans are not unique to New Orleans. He states, "While taco trucks' public presence has made them a focus for anti-immigrant outrage—even when they are operated by Mexican American citizens—the struggles over street vending have also revealed how the pursuit of culinary authenticity is embedded within complicated relations of race and class."[14] Scholars like Pilcher, Vicki Ruiz, and Brenda Plummer, reaffirmed Bustillo's remarks, which claim that racialized and anti-immigrant tensions fueled these policies.[15] Ruiz suggests that the policy is clearly discriminatory, positing that these policies exhibit how "racial/ethnic foodscapes [serve] as markers of belonging and difference set within a larger frame of U.S. inequality.[16]

While the Jefferson Parish ban has been in place since 2007, recent legislation backed by Councilmember Cynthia Lee-Sheng introduced a bill to allow food trucks in the Fat City neighborhood of Jefferson Parish, which is considered a burgeoning suburban food destination. The bill passed in April 2014 allowing food trucks in the neighborhood once a month and for the Lafreniere Live! Festival, which takes place every April. These exceptions, which were enough for the *Times-Picayune* to dub Metairie as a "friendlier place for food trucks," but hardly take into account the realities of food trucks as a livelihood for food truck vendors.[17] It would be impossible for food truck vendors, particularly *lonchera* workers, to subsist on just one day per month worth of sales in Jefferson Parish, especially in venues that are predominantly non-Latinx. This narrow policy amendment, portrayed as expansive, can be decoded as further alienation of these *loncheras*. It illustrates the Jefferson Parish City Council's willingness to extend their policy for only gourmet trucks that vend more in festival scenarios and in more versatile spaces. They continue to offer no option for *loncheras* that are more inclined to sell daily in one or two specific locations to a predominantly Spanish-speaking clientele.

This policy-making in both parishes call for a framework of analysis using Arlene Dávila's "hierarchies of culture" in order to understand the value placed on this culture and the cultural worker. In Orleans Parish, dominant penchants for gourmet food trucks helped shape and define these food truck policy liberalizations; for Jefferson Parish, Councilmember Lee-Scheng's amended bill also catered to these dominant trends of gourmet food trucks. But, both ignored the realities of the Latinx community and the *lonchera* owners. As shown through the case of Magda, I will

illustrate how the actual needs and realities of the local culture—for her, a policy that allows for trailers to pass as food trucks—are ignored in Orleans Parish. Instead, lawmakers draft policy that fits an idealized imaginary of a food truck rather than the localized reality. In Jefferson Parish, a temporary allowance for food trucks in Fat City fails to depict the realities of these cultural workers; rather, they focus on the fad—the culture—and leave out the needs of the worker.[18]

Moreover, through the concept of "practical norms," used by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, I will explain how people navigate around official regulations in order to gain legitimacy within these bureaucracies. Olivier de Sardan posits that practical norms "occupy the margins or the backstage" and "may deviate quite significantly from official rules and even transgress them radically in practice."[19] Some *lonchera* owners learn different methods of licensing through local networks figuring out the practical norms to get by, both defying and working within the system. Meanwhile, other aspiring business-owners are unable to access this documentation because they are unaware of these channels and instead (unsuccessfully) attempt licensing by following the explicit rules, which prove to be unfeasible. Further, John G. Galaty make the distinction between forms of knowledge between the "that" and the "how," "the first a form of propositional knowledge that can be recited, the second a type of procedural knowledge that can only be imitated in practice."[20] Grasping how people operate using these practical norms may help to better inform policy, practices, and understanding of why and how people utilize these backdoor means to legitimacy and/or survival.

With the ban on food trucks in Jefferson Parish, many of the trucks moved to Orleans Parish. Some people welcomed the change, while others questioned its impacts. Examining these two parishes' policies on food trucks illustrates the varying reactions of the respective City/Parish Councils in regards to the presence of food trucks, food truck workers, and clientele. Jefferson Parish's exclusionary policies clearly entail racialized connotations that aim to exclude Latinx vendors who arrived after Katrina. Meanwhile, Orleans Parish's more economically liberal policy seemingly caters to the freewheeling nature of capitalism, but only in a way that fits the needs of dominant trends. In both cases, the criminalization of *loncheras* and the spaces that surround them, illustrate further limitations of these neoliberal policies that fail to take into consideration the experiences of not just the *lonchera* owners, but also of their clientele.

Policing the *Esquinas*

Using a mass text messaging system, the Congress of Day Laborers issue alerts to subscribers about local events, ranging from reminders about weekly meetings to *ojos* (warnings) about the presence of ICE agents or police officers conducting road blocks. Roadblocks usually mean checking for drunk drivers, searching for suspects, or locating missing children when an Amber Alert is issued. The stops are discretionary, requiring the driver to show their proof of insurance and driver's license. Undocumented immigrants can get car insurance, but, in most states like Louisiana, are unable to obtain a driver's license. With a poor public transit system in New Orleans, many undocumented people take the risk and drive without a drivers' license, oftentimes hoping that an international license will suffice. Most times international licenses are not enough and the

driver ends up with a ticket for no driver's license or, in many cases, detained. Roadblocks are high stakes and risk for the undocumented community.

As a subscriber to this mass text messaging system, I received an alert on August 27, 2016 at 11:47 a.m., notifying members about local law enforcement setting up a roadblock in front of the *lonchera,* Taqueria Muy Rica, located on a desolate street near the day laborer *esquina* at Lowe's Hardware Store on Elysian Fields. The intersection where they set up the roadblock is located directly under the Elysian Fields overpass at a four-way stop. Few people use the intersection, which offers a back route into the Lowe's store via Florida Avenue. Day laborers and Taqueria Muy Rica customers are the main occupants of the space. While the reason behind the roadblock is unclear, it stirred fear within the day laborer community, with posts on social media helping to disseminate the warning. These alerts are common across the metropolitan area, but this particular text seemed even more specific to that site. *The New Orleans Advocate* listed a couple robberies and a shooting near the site one month before the roadblock; that was the only event I could determine as a justified reason for such a heavy-duty policing presence.[21]

Until 2013, Taqueria Muy Rica posted up directly in front of the Lowe's Hardware store. Private property battles with Lowe's and subsequent threats from store security and police officers forced Maria, the owner of Taqueria Muy Rica, to move from her original visible spot in front of Lowe's. Even though the taco truck parked off the side road parallel to the Elysian Fields and did not obstruct traffic, the authorities still made claims that the *lonchera* impeded the entry for their customers. Similarly, the presence of workers looking for jobs in the same vicinity also increased tension with local authorities. At times, the day laborers did encroach on Lowe's property in the entry

or by sitting on a grassy knoll, about twenty feet in front of the *lonchera*. But, most of the time day laborers stayed in the public space, resting in the shade and sitting on the roots of a row of live oaks that line the space between the road and the sidewalk.

In their collaborative work examining sidewalks as public spaces, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Renia Ehrenfeucht address the overlap between food and Latinx workers. The scholars posit, “Street vendors and day laborers, driven by economic need, have negotiated their presence, evading or challenging regulations and asserting their claims to the city in the process.”[22] These scholars recognize the tensions of these public spaces as they are often criminalized and targeted for their unfamiliarity. Furthermore, the authors illustrate the resistance of these vendors and laborers in challenging preset norms by maximizing the public usage of these sidewalk spaces and side streets. Oftentimes *loncheras* have little option but to remain on the periphery—in the parking lots of vacant strip malls, wedged between buildings, or hidden underneath bridges. The reasoning behind this is twofold. First, the majority of their marginalized clientele either looks for work or is forced to live in these fringe spaces. Second, establishing a relatively clandestine locale with a limited profile helps to avoid attention—from clerks at Lowe’s to law enforcement officials to ICE agents.

Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht posit, “Street vending, day laboring, and other informal economic activities are driven by large national and supranational forces, but they are also sites where transnational migrations become visible to established residents and merchants. Cultural differences, a discomfort with these differences, and the changing circumstances that bring them about underlie the local tensions.”[23] In New Orleans, day laborers and *loncheras* are forced to fit within these spatial *de facto* terms as

normalized by storeowners and police officers, and reinforced by the omnipresent threat of ICE agents. Because the use of these sidewalk public spaces as sites for employment became somewhat of a new phenomenon after Katrina, it generated a change to the neighborhood and required the day laborers and food vendors to renegotiate the public of these spaces within *de jure* terms.[24]

Moreover, these scholars correctly address the "national and supranational forces" that contribute to the restructuring of the global economy. This restructuring leans towards neoliberal practices that foster unfettered markets, pander to the private sector, and prioritize efficiency. On the federal level, immediately after Katrina the Bush administration suspended federal regulations that protect workers like the Davis Bacon Act (paying local prevailing wage for federally funded public works projects) and OSHA compliance (standards to ensure safe work site conditions) in order to fast-track cleanup and "rebuild above all else."[25] Even though these suspensions ceased after a month, they set a precedent for the mistreatment of workers, particularly Latinx day laborers. First, these suspensions engendered a disposable class of day laborer work, one that subjected workers to minimal standards by implicitly legalizing wage theft and exposed workers to extremely vile and dangerous conditions.[26] Second, these suspensions directly benefitted private contractors receiving FEMA funding in that their labor practices, particularly wages paid to employees, went unregulated. In a sense, the targeting of these *lonchera* spaces captures the inherent contradiction of neoliberal markets in that *loncheras* are essentially avatars of these free market enterprises and the exploitation of day laborers are the byproducts of unregulated systems.

Likewise, Mae Ngai argues that "undocumented immigrants are at once welcome and unwelcome: they are woven into the economic fabric of the nation but as labor that is cheap and disposable."[27] Ngai teases out the paradox that within a neoliberal context, showing that as global capital, goods, and information flow freely, borders are reinforced by exclusionary rhetoric resulting in restrictive immigration policies that trap people within imagined national boundaries.[28] Similarly, Elizabeth Fussell provides a theoretical context through which to frame the experiences of these New Orleans day laborers and street vendors. By privileging the contractor and disregarding the rights of the day laborers, Fussell argues that these practices generate channels between contractors, local law enforcement and ICE agents through what she calls the deportation threat dynamic.[29]

With this concept, Fussell examines the relationship between day laborers and contractors, through the vulnerabilities that emerged based on perceptions of them as undocumented—a status oftentimes desired by the contractors. Fussell argues these workers are automatically considered to be undocumented because of their work as day laborers and because they speak Spanish. Additionally, because undocumented workers are considered to have limited rights, Fussell contends that this leads to wage theft and subsequent victimization by some contractors. Fussell suggests that within this dialectic between migrant and employer, the threat of deportation begets exploitation of these workers and their reluctance in reporting wage theft abuses and/or poor workplace conditions.[30] Regardless of immigration status, undocumented people do have access to workers' compensation claims, wage theft prosecution and other work-related protections; however, language barrier, lack of knowledge on these rights, and financial

concerns prevent many day laborers and street vendors from accessing these resources and challenging greedy contractors.

In 2011, a case occurred on the day laborer corner fifty feet from Taqueria Muy Rica in which ICE officials arrested day laborer Marcelo Portillo during an undercover raid. The case was labeled as a "sting operation" and condemned as racial profiling by local community organizations and the press. ICE officers posing as contractors for a painting service in an undercover van picked up two other day laborers, along with Portillo, and drove around the block where they were stopped by uniformed ICE agents.[31] According to *The Lens,* the agents "pulled Portillo's jacket over his head, forced him to the ground, and pushed and kicked him repeatedly. When the beating stopped, they handcuffed Portillo and took him to the ICE office."[32] The official ICE report framed the abuse of Portillo as self-defense and said that they pulled him over because he resembled a wanted fugitive, for which they never provided evidence.

Portillo, an active member of the Congress of Day Laborers, sought help from their legal department. The attorneys took his case to federal immigration court citing that his rights were violated by the sting operation and through racial profiling. Despite a strong effort by his legal defense over a four-year period, the judge denied the requests to close Portillo's case on the grounds that he is a Mexican national. She issued an order of deportation for Portillo. His attorneys appealed the case, but the appeal was denied in 2015 and he was given a date to self-deport. Portillo's case illustrates the precarious nature for day laborers at the *esquinas* and the lack of accountability of ICE officials. Unfortunately, Portillo's case is not an isolated incident. Since Katrina, local law enforcement and ICE officials have targeted these spaces by profiling individuals based

on perceptions of race, class, gender, immigration status, and language. Portillo's case serves as a metaphor for these other stories of criminalization of the day laborers on the *esquinas,* illustrating how these spaces are known targets for law enforcement—either ticketing *loncheras* for zoning infractions or targeting day laborers as they legally search for employment.

The same year as Portillo's run in with ICE officials at the Elysian Fields' *esquina,* a successful partnership between local officials and day laborers occurred in Gretna, a small town in Jefferson Parish. In 2011, the city of Gretna sought to implement an ordinance that would have criminalized day laborers and banned them from seeking work in public spaces. Day laborers successfully organized to fight against this legislation. Along with community organizers from the Congress of Day Laborers, the mostly undocumented, Spanish-speaking workers met with Home Depot representatives, the mayor, sheriff, and other city officials from Gretna. One of the organizers interpreted the negotiations with the public officials as they determined the fate of these day laborers.

Instead of criminalizing these workers for their job pursuits, the city officials decided to designate a central area for the day laborer *esquina* so they would no longer crowd the Home Depot entrance. Located directly under the Highway 90 overpass, the space is flanked by two Mexican restaurants, Taqueria Sanchez and Benny's Taqueria. The City of Gretna and Home Depot donated five picnic tables and a large white canopy to protect the workers from rain. The mayor's office also rented a port-a-potty to the day laborers for a monthly fee of fifty dollars, collected through donations at the *esquina.* On January 30, 2011, the Gretna Day Laborer Site became official and commemorated the effort through a ribbon cutting ceremony.[33] The mayor recognized these day laborers as a

vital part of the local economy and the continued reconstruction efforts. The *Times-Picayune* quoted Mayor Ronnie Harris stating that, "Our decision to invest in a designated area came out of recognition that we are one community."[34] Local Gretna officials, influenced by the mobilization and coordination of the day laborers, embraced the changing circumstances of their city by creating a secure environment for employment pursuits. Gretna officials settled on more inclusionary policy for the Latinx community in Jefferson Parish, representing a stark contrast to the exclusionary rhetoric exhibited through the Jefferson Parish food truck ban.

The day laborer *esquina* in Gretna is the exception in the New Orleans metropolitan area. Tensions continue to fester between storeowners, street vendors, and day laborers. Complaints by store employees oftentimes lead to calling the police and subsequent enforcement, whether just or not, for violations of trespassing for both day laborers and *lonchera* owners. This misdemeanor charge usually comes with a fine of less than $500 and/or community service; however, for the undocumented community, the potential punishment is much harsher—cases across the United States of individuals picked up for broken taillights, fishing without a license, and street food vending are all examples of minor offenses that ended up in deportation processes.[35]

ICE-sponsored policies and ongoing collaboration with the local police enforcement illustrate this criminalization of the Latinx community, particularly day laborers and their families. At the same time, these examples demonstrate the capacity of the day laborer community to exercise agency and fight back against unjust policies and work towards collaboration with business owners and city officials. The anti-immigrant policies provide further justification to explain the fear and distrust rampant among the

day laborer population and the *loncheras* that feed them. Despite these small victories for the community, there is still little oversight in regards to the day-to-day employment processes of day laborers as contractors continue to thrive on disposable labor. Workers, in general, continue to suffer because of under regulated labor laws and low wages.

Mateo's Family Fleet

Mateo and his family own three *loncheras* across the city. But, being a food truck magnate was never his intention. Originally from Veracruz, Mexico, Mateo arrived in New Orleans in 2006 to work in construction. "Opening a *lonchera* really wasn't the motivation for me coming here," he explained, "I came here to have a better income, to be able to better provide for my family, that's why I came to this city." When Mateo began work in construction he, like many other day laborers, fell victim to wage theft from exploitative contractors that underpaid workers. Day laborers worked relentlessly—gutting homes, cleaning out businesses—but fell victim to these lax regulations receiving little to no compensation or protection. Meanwhile corrupt contractors reaped the benefits off the backs of these workers.

After Mateo amassed thousands of dollars in unpaid wages, he sought recourse from the recently established Congress of Day Laborers, which was in the midst of an Anti-Wage Theft Campaign aimed to help draw attention to the issue and to help workers recuperate some of these wages. According to a report conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, eight out of ten Latinx workers experienced wage theft after Katrina.[36] Mateo's disillusionment with the industry caused him to leave construction, joining his sister, Julia, in the food vending business.

Julia had been living in the United States since 2000. She moved to New Orleans from Tennessee after Katrina in 2005 taking a job at McDonald's where she worked twenty to thirty hours per week at nine dollars per hour. Julia, a mother of two young children, made tamales in the mornings on days when she did not have to work, helping to fill the void of food options in the city. In 2006, Julia quit her job at McDonald's to sell tamales full-time, but she lacked the proper licensing. Mateo and his then-wife, Luz, helped Julia, with Mateo delivering the tamales to his former job sites, maximizing on the connections he made while working in construction. Making tamales provided them with lucrative work and gave them a flexible schedule. Julia, Luz, and Mateo sold 100-130 tamales each day, making between $300 and $400, which totaled around $7,000 income generated per month.

Their informal enterprise thrived as they sold food at the various day laborer *esquinas*. The only *esquina* they did not frequent was at the Home Depot on Carrollton Avenue and Toulouse Street, because another tamale vendor had already claimed that territory. For several months in 2006, their informal business prospered. But, as the city began to normalize operations, police started to approach them, questioning them about licensing. Mateo said, "the police started to bother us, well not really bother us, but make us follow the rules—we had to get licensing, pay taxes." The siblings realized they needed an infrastructure and licensing in order to maintain their business. And, because they are both undocumented, they feared that the police encounters could lead to harsher penalties.

Mateo was told by one of his customers to contact Carlos Diaz, a Brazilian-American who brought a fleet of ten taco trucks from New York to New Orleans. Carlos

was well acquainted with the nuances of food vending in post-Katrina New Orleans. Representatives from Tulane University had recruited him to come to the city, approaching him in 2006 to sell food to reconstruction workers on the university campus. They had the workers to help rebuild the campus, but no one to feed the workers. Carlos had been selling his food in New York City since 1995, but was convinced by the Tulane representatives to bring his fleet of trucks down to New Orleans in 2006. When his services were no longer needed at Tulane, Carlos took his business to the streets of New Orleans, posting his trucks up throughout the city. Carlos opted to sell Mexican food out of the trucks, which he claimed was more conducive to food truck vending than his native Brazilian food.[37]

Mateo and his team first began working on a *lonchera* for Carlos. They sold food off Causeway Boulevard in the suburbs of Jefferson Parish, until the food truck ban passed in June 2007. Mateo said that the *loncheras* "disappeared from Jefferson and St. Bernard (Parishes)." Once the options for food truck vending became limited and more regulated, Carlos scaled back his mobile enterprise opting for brick and mortar spaces rather than his former bread and butter—the *loncheras.* Carlos has since opened a restaurant in the back of the bar, Café Negril, in the touristy music district of Frenchman Street. Carlos used to park one of his trucks near the bar until the city enforced its ban on trucks in the French Quarter and Marigny neighborhoods. In response, Carlos named his brick and mortar establishment in Café Negril, Carlos's Taco Truck.

In 2007, Mateo and Julia started out by renting a truck from Carlos, selling food at different *esquinas* and construction sites. They didn't have enough capital to buy a truck of their own, but they wanted their own *lonchera.* At that point, Mateo and Carlos

had become good friends. Carlos empathized with Mateo's position, and the two bartered. Mateo swapped out his old van and $1,000 for the smallest truck on Carlos's fleet, a 1986 yellow trailer with the words "Tacos, Ice Cream" painted on the side. Mateo said laughingly, "That's the one we had the money for. And I never painted it." Mateo and Julia invested money, installing all the necessary items to get it up to par for inspection. "That was the beginning of 'Taqueria Aguila," Mateo said, underscoring Carlos's role, "He taught me the business, the rules, the requirements to have a truck." Mateo learned the tricks of the trade at the same time that the legislators and restaurant owners were defining and redefining the trade.

After 2007, Mateo said that the rules "kept changing each year" for *loncheras.* He complained about the cumbersome process of getting the annual licensing, which he said could be simplified by doing them all at the same time. Each year in addition to the yearly taxes, he explained that he has to pass inspections by City Hall in January ($700), the Fire Department in February ($150), the state inspection in February, and the Health Department in June ($150). He explained that in 2015, he had to update all of his trucks to have an automatic-fire suppression system, which cost him $4,000. "Each year you have to install something new," he said.

Since 2008, Mateo and Julia settled on a space behind a gas station in Central City, about 500 yards from the day laborer *esquina* on the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. and Claiborne Avenues. The *lonchera* sits on the empty side street directly in front of an automotive repair shop, in between cars and trucks awaiting repair. It is hidden from the main view of the busy intersection. In 2014, Mateo opened up a second spot in the parking lot at Louisiana and Claiborne Avenues, less than a mile away from the original

location. At the second location, Mateo wanted the truck to be more visible in a "central spot," to attract non-Latinx clientele. On the rear side of the *lonchera* Mateo had his friend paint the image of the New Orleans Saints NFL football team mascot. "I thought people would like it," he said laughingly at his various attempts to lure in non-Latinx patrons. He explained that he even bought a credit card machine system for $1,500 to accommodate the English-speaking community, positing, "the white community practically doesn't use cash…before they came but didn't have cash." He said that he quickly made up for his investment in the credit card machine and is hoping that "half of the sales at the Louisiana location will be from cards—it's safe for the clientele and safe for me." He explained that at the new spot they didn't lose any customers because "the ones that went to the original truck already know about it and they already recommend it. The new truck attracts new customers."

But, the Louisiana Avenue location has already given him plenty of problems. Mateo said that because it is so visible, the truck is always subject to inspection. He said, "I took my daughters on vacation to Florida, and the day I left, the city inspection came. Everything was fine because I kept it up to code." He went on to

Figure 8: Mateo's Taqueria Aguila situated near the day laborer *esquina* in Central City. Photo taken by Fernando Lopez.

explain, “Because we have been doing this for so long, we know what to do to keep it up to par.” He also explained that these tight regulations are what confine them to one spot, “(we) stay in the same place, for a while we moved the *lonchera* around, but it is too dangerous. Anything can happen en route.” The danger that Mateo alludes to is the constant threat of inspections. But, the paradox of this regulation is that according to New Orleans food truck policies, trucks can only remain in one location for four hours (prior to 2014 it was forty minutes).[38] When I pointed this out to Mateo he said, “The inspections just keep the trucks up to code, for cleanliness, correct signage, equipment; they don’t enforce the time limits. If they did, we’d all be in trouble.”

Mateo explained his typical day to me. They get up at 5 a.m in the summertime and 4 a.m. in the winter. In the winter they need more time in the morning to prepare hot beverages like *atole*, a hot corn-based beverage. Each truck arrives at its respective spot by 6 a.m. They have a steady line of people until 9 a.m., when many people start to show up because it is their work break. He said that people order “breakfasts, to hold them over until the lunch break around noon.” He explained that the second wave of people arrives around noon and lasts for about two hours. By 3 p.m. the crowd slows down. They clean up the inside of the *loncheras* and then drive them home. The two *loncheras* off Claiborne Avenue are open seven days a week. In the fall of 2015, Mateo and Julia opened a new business venture—a third *lonchera* in Mid-City. Mateo said that a friend that owns a gas station off Broad Street invited them to sell food in an open lot next to them. The *lonchera* blends in with the gas station as it sits back, barely visible from the busy road. Julia operates the Broad Street *lonchera,* leaving Luz at the original spot, and Mateo to manage the *lonchera* on Louisiana Avenue.

When I asked Julia about the new spot, she said they are still gauging the success of the new location. But, their success is already evident through their mobility that led them from tamale street vendors to the owners of three trucks. In spite of their undocumented status, Mateo and Julia attained some levels of class and spatial mobility. This entrepreneurial growth is the definition of the capitalistic ethos ingrained in our system. They worked hard, but they also learned the practical norms and the tricks of the trade that enabled them to get by inspections, obtain a license with no Louisiana ID. Their experience shows the importance of social capital in enabling access to opportunities and knowledge.

This type of knowledge is not the type of knowledge listed on City Hall websites. It is learned, understood, implicit, and written between the lines. Carlos had the experience of working in another state with more liberal standards for *loncheras.* He arrived in the city at a time when food trucks were on the rise, and legislators scrambled to figure out how to deal with these new methods of selling food. On the one hand, legislators wanted to be open to the freewheeling enterprise. On the other hand, the same legislators questioned their acceptance of these new waves of Latinxs. The case of Magda, a mother of two who worked on the *lonchera*, El Gato II, offers a counterpoint to Mateo and Julia's successes. Magda's story demonstrates the barriers that come into play when attempting to get a food truck permit with limited social capital, but by following the rules.

Magda's Trailer

Originally from the coffee-producing region of Santa Barbara, Honduras, Magda came to New Orleans a year after Hurricane Katrina. Since arriving she has worked

various jobs in the city, ranging from domestic work to gas station attendant. I met Magda in 2012 when I first began working with the Congress of Day Laborers. Magda regularly attended the meetings with her sisters. At that point, my interactions with her were minimal—usually a simple greeting, followed by the customary lean in kiss on the left cheek. Magda sometimes showed up just with her sisters to the meetings, and other times she arrived with a crew of cousins, siblings, and friends. It wasn't until I ran into Magda working at Taqueria La Gato II, located off Claiborne Street in the Lower Ninth Ward, that we formed a friendship.

Taqueria La Gato II is the only Mexican food vendor in the Lower Ninth Ward, a food desert left dry after Katrina. At the cross section of Tupelo Street and North Claiborne Avenue, the taco truck advertises $1.50 beef tacos on a white sign with faded red lettering positioned right off the side of the road. Sandwiched between the Industrial Canal to the West, Chalmette to the East, and New Orleans East to the northeast, La Gato II offers cheap and satisfying meals for people passing through the neighborhood on the busy commuter route of Highway 39. Further, it provides a familiar and convenient service to Latinx day laborers that continue to help rebuild in that neighborhood, which was one of the areas most devastated by the disaster. Located about two miles away, El Gato I is more mobile, as it rotates to different venues—mostly parking lots in abandoned shopping centers—serving Mexican and Central American food to people in the New Orleans East neighborhood. Magda worked off and on with El Gato II and sometimes on El Gato I, until she got a job working as a gas station cashier.

Around the same time, in the fall of 2012 the father of Magda's children, who still lived in rural Santa Barbara, was shot and killed in his home. The assassins were never

caught and no motive was determined. At that time, Magda had been separated from him since she left Honduras in 2006; however, he still had custody of their two teenage children thirteen and fifteen, who remained behind in Honduras. Like many Honduran parents living in the United States, Magda feared for the lives of her children. Within the next year, Magda sent for them to come to live with her, paying a coyote to make the perilous journey bringing them across the border. The children would join the other 100,000 unaccompanied children and youth that fled Central America in the last five years, arriving in 2013 and reuniting with Magda and her sisters in their home in Chalmette.[39]

Magda became tired of her job at the gas station, and she wanted to be her own boss. She recognized the demand from the people and the dearth of food options in the Upper Ninth Ward, so she decided she wanted to start her own truck. In July 2013, Magda approached the organizers of the Congress of Day Laborers, soliciting their help to open a food truck. Considering my research on food and policy, they put me on the task of helping Magda. The policy for owning a food truck in New Orleans had recently changed rather significantly; New Orleans City Hall even expanded their client service to a more efficient system for business licensing in what is called the One Stop Shop.

The initial step to help Magda was to check out the online resources for the One Stop Shop. The website clearly posted the instructions for opening a food truck—guidelines, bullet points outlining the new policy, and even a checklist. One major issue was that the instructions were only available in English. I did a rough translation and provided Magda with a hard copy. Within a week, she and I went to the One Stop Shop to go over the steps for opening a food truck with the clerks in person. We briefly sat in the

waiting room until the loudspeaker announced our number. We met with the clerk, a friendly woman who sat behind a cubicle at a desk. Magda asked some basic questions and I interpreted. She wanted clarification on the certificates required from the Health Department and the Fire Department. Everything went smoothly. At this point Magda and her business partner, Juan, had purchased what would become their taco truck—a red, stainless steel 2012 12X6 trailer in good condition. The trailer only needed minimal work to pass inspection. Having worked on El Gato II, Magda knew that basic requirements for the inspections.

Within the next eight months, Juan and Magda worked diligently to get their *lonchera* up to par. A quiet man in his mid-forties and originally from Mexico, Juan had been living in New Orleans since before Katrina and is a naturalized U.S. citizen. He had taken the day off from his job as an ice vendor in St. Bernard Parish in order to help Magda with the paperwork. The truck would be in Juan's name because he had the Louisiana driver's license required to procure the food truck permit. Because Magda is undocumented and has no driver's license, she was unable to get the license alone; however, she could still be listed as the main employee on the food truck and as a co-owner. Together, Juan and Magda had invested slightly over $20,000 in preparing the truck, paying fees, and getting the correct certification to meet the One Stop Shop's standards. This preparation included Juan travelling five hours to Houston in order to get new parts to upgrade the kitchen inside the truck. He claimed it was cheaper to drive five hours and make the long journey than to find someone to do it in New Orleans. "*Loncheras* are much more common in Houston," he claimed.

On March 30, 2015 Magda contacted me saying that she and Juan had completed the Health Department and the Fire Department Inspections and were ready to get the licensing. I met them at City Hall on a Monday around mid-morning. Once again we sat in the waiting area of the One Stop Shop. The clerk attended to us after we waited for approximately twenty minutes. During this time Juan and Magda proudly showed me the certification and all the necessary documentation that they had completed. They even had a page dedicated to four photos of the red taco truck, which looked shiny and new. Magda and Juan had meticulously prepared each piece of paperwork and documentation in a white three-ringed binder. Receipts for work done on mechanical work the truck and all possible paperwork imaginable filled the pockets of the binder.

As we waited, Magda told me that she was ready to open the truck that same day. She had not been working in the last month and needed income. One sister had a steady job bartending at the newly opened Mexican restaurant uptown. Her other sister worked off and on cleaning house, but mostly stayed home with her small child. Magda's kids studied in school. She needed to start working fast so she could help support the family. She knew the exact spot where they would set up the truck and had already notified their friends and acquaintances that the taco truck would be open soon. As I filled out the initial forms (in English) to apply for the license, I asked Magda and Juan the name for the business. "Taqueria La Duranguense," they said in unison, referring to the state of Durango, located in central Mexico. Magda, who had already confirmed that she would be the principal cook on the truck, said that they wanted to give it a Mexican name because people are more familiar with Mexican food. "Nobody knows about Honduran food," she said.

Figure 9: Picture of Taqueria Duranguense taken from Magda's binder. Photo taken by Sarah Fouts.

Once we completed the initial application form, we met with the same clerk with whom we had talked to eight months prior. The three of us sat down at her cubicle with Magda holding the white binder in a way that captured both her pride and protection. When the clerk asked for a specific document, I interpreted for Magda, and she found the document immediately. This process continued—the copy of the driver's license, the occupational license, the certificates, the proof of insurance with liability coverage of at least $500,000. Then, the clerk asked for the pictures of the future Taqueria Duranguense. Magda quickly turned to the page with the four photos of the trailer pasted neatly. The clerk took one look at the photos and asked about the axle. According to the policy, food trucks must have two axles. Taqueria La Duranguense only had one. That was a big hurdle. We briefly convened. Juan was certain he could have someone weld another axle on the front of the trailer.

We reported back to the clerk, only to encounter the next hurdle—she said it must be a "self-propelled" vehicle to qualify for the permit. This detail came as a bit of a surprise. First, at that point "self-propelled" vehicle was not listed on the requirements on the checklist—just the size regulations and the double axle requirement (which we all had clearly overlooked). Second, it had not occurred to me that the images of Taqueria Duranguense are of taco trailers, not food trucks. What's the difference? How did we not think of this? As this information registered, I had to interpret the upsetting news to Juan and Magda. They were devastated, but not ready to give up. They had questions, including many "what if" scenarios.

Seeing our frustration, the clerk sent us to the director of the One Stop Shop. We walked about fifty feet to her spacious office overlooking downtown New Orleans. Magda and Juan were in shock, completely overwhelmed with the situation; I was flustered. The director was friendly enough having Magda and I sit in chairs in front of her desk. She grabbed a third chair from another room for Juan. Magda immediately showed her the photographs of the trailer. I quickly asked, "Can they still get a food truck license?" She shook her head, "No." She said that it is not self-propelled therefore they cannot provide a license. She and I spoke quickly, back and forth, in English. I tried out the "what ifs" that Magda had used on the clerk, but again, to no avail. I tried to interpret the key parts to Juan and Magda, but they were lost in a barrier that goes beyond just the English language. This barrier includes a wall of bureaucracy with entirely too many rules and too much paperwork. Papers! These barriers seemed so distant, so far from the objective—making tacos, burritos, *baleadas,* horchata.

The director was apologetic. I told her that most of the *loncheras* in Orleans Parish are trailers. I thought about Mateo's fleet, which consists of two trailers and one self-propelled truck. I explained, "A large truck drives the trailers to their respective sites. Some trucks leave. Some trucks stay. Don't the trucks make the trailers self-propelled?" I continued, "The plan is that Juan will self-propel Taqueria Duranguense to the Upper Ninth Ward each day using his truck. Magda will serve the tortas, gorditas, and tamales." It seemed so simple. She said that the existing taco trailers must have been grandfathered in before 2013. Was that really true? I did not want to jeopardize the legitimacy of a crew of trucks that had somehow negotiated a license for their food vending. It left me questioning the legitimacy of many of the taco trailers in the city—Taqueria Aguila, Taqueria El Gato I and II, Taqueria Las Palmas. The list goes on. It also left me questioning the legitimacy of the licensing itself. Does it matter? And, to whom? Seeing the devastated looks on Juan and Magda's faces, the director admitted, honestly, "We don't have enough staff to regulate these licenses." I had inferred correctly, and as we got up to leave, I wondered to myself if anyone even does check on the licensing.

We walked out of the director's office feeling defeated. I relayed to them in Spanish the rest of the details of the meeting that I had left out in the quick exchange. Magda and Juan were speechless. Then I told them the last line that was said to me, "They don't have enough staff to regulate these licenses." Magda—a woman I had never previously seen mad—cringed, with her face quickly turning red. "Maldonado," she vehemently exclaimed, referring to one of the few Spanish-speaking officers that work for New Orleans Police Department. Officer Frank Maldonado, originally from Colombia, was officially given the title of liaison to the Hispanic community in 2009.

Rather than creating trust within this community, Maldonado developed enemies, abusing his power. I heard stories from day laborers that he would talk down to them, calling them "illegal" and speaking to them condescendingly.

When Mayor Mitch Landrieu spoke at the Congress of day Laborer meeting in the fall of 2014, the mayor insisted that Maldonado be his interpreter despite recommendations to not use Maldonado by his staff. Disgusted with the prospect of Maldonado as the literal voice of the mayor, the Congress of Day Laborer leaders protested his presence in their safe space, but to no avail. I knew what Magda meant as soon of she said his name. She anticipated that Maldonado would act duplicitously, schmoozing with food vendors and day laborers, while ticketing them and condemning them as "illegals." In my fieldwork I had seen him on multiple occasions at the old Taqueria Las Palmas on Elysian Fields. Maldonado would buy plates of food then issue tickets to day laborers for trespassing or loitering. "*Sapo,"* proclaimed Magda. "*El es un sapo,"* she repeated, calling the bilingual officer a "snitch." We left City Hall. Magda said she was going to look into getting a license out of Houma, a small town located about fifty miles southwest of New Orleans in Terrebonne Parish. She had heard it was easier to get licenses there and thought she could sell food. I said I would look into a contact a couple of people in New Orleans to see if there were any other options.

Magda followed up with me a couple of months later. I expected her to tell me that she had purchased the license in Houma. Instead she said that she had sold the trailer for $5,000, a $15,000 loss on her investment. She was heartbroken and broke. She said she sold the *lonchera* to the people on Elysian Fields. She said that they had gotten a license to sell food. I went multiple times to find the trailer on Elysian Fields, but I only

saw Taqueria Muy Rica in its usual spot under the overpass. And then, in the fall of 2015, I went to Lowe's and saw the red stainless steel truck in Taqueria Muy Rica' spot. I quickly rerouted, cutting through the Lowe's parking lot to talk to the new owners. It was Maria and her sister, the owners of Taqueria Muy Rica. I told them about my experience going to City Hall with Magda and our failure to get a license. They knew the story. "*Que lastima,"* said Maria. What a shame. I asked her bluntly how they were able to get the licenses—a question I usually take time to set up and ease into. I figured I had gained her trust and that they would show sympathy toward my experience with Magda. She did. Maria said, "You know the pulgas (flea market) on the West Bank?" I nodded. She continued, "The woman that works there gets the licensing for us." Even though I was tempted, I did not press the issue much further. I asked how she gets the licensing and she answered with a shrug.

Conclusion

Maria's ability to get this licensing for Taqueria Muy Rica compared to Magda and Juan's inability raises many questions in regards to legitimacy and how to gain access. Magda and Juan went through all the right channels and the bureaucratic rigmarole to legally get licensed. They went through the bureaucracy of City Hall and the "business-friendly" One Stop Shop. Like Maria and Taqueria Muy Rica, they complied with each step, from posting the required "No Smoking" signs to getting $500,000 liability insurance. On this track, they encountered tangible but preventable barriers—from English language access to semantics over what constitutes a food truck—that complicated their seemingly simple vision. By operating above board and following the

rules, they took a financial loss and experienced the devastation of prolonged unemployment.

On the other hand, Mateo and Julia came in at a time when legislators scrambled to figure out just what to do with these newer forms of vending. Through the experience of Carlos, Mateo was able to figure out the practical norms and the tricks. He kept up with the updates and was grandfathered in, allowing him to shirk new requirements, enabling him to build his *lonchera* chain. Mateo had the social capital, which in his case, was much more valuable than the finance capital. He bought his "Tacos, Ice Cream" little yellow trailer in exchange for $1,000 and a used van. On the contrary, Magda and Juan had the financial capital, but they lacked the right social capital. Instead of having the connections of Carlos, Magda and Juan based their investment on Magda's knowledge working on El Gato II and on me, who could do little more than interpret and follow the unclear rules. I even failed to grasp the linguistic nuance—*lonchera,* used interchangeably with taco truck and trailer—that could have helped prevent the disappointment. Better yet, the policy makers failed to grasp the realities of these workers in their rigid cultural imaginary of food trucks.

After the experience with Juan and Magda, the employers at the One Stop Shop updated their checklists and added Spanish and Vietnamese language documents. The part specifying the requirements for the self-propelled vehicle now makes the rules clear. It reads, "PLEASE NOTE: only 2 axle, self-propelled vehicles qualify for this permit. Trailers do not qualify unless you held a valid mobile vendor permit prior to July 2013."[40] This update was too late for Magda and Juan. I imagine they weren't the only ones that fell through the cracks of this capricious legislation. In this case, the practical

norms—finding solutions through underground means (like the woman at the *pulgas* and Mateo's ability to the learn the tricks of the trade from Carlos)—proved to be most efficient. Moreover, the efficacy of these practical norms transcends food truck permitting. They involve paying a coyote to get your children across the border when the immigration system provides no other viable option. When the legal channels obfuscate the objectives (which, in many cases are matters not just of livelihoods, but of life and death), then the only options become these practical norms. They involve the federal government suspending key labor legislation immediately after Katrina to expedite work and workers. The political and cultural context in which these practical norms play out determine if and when these practical norms are criminalized.

Further, the case of Magda and Juan also helps explain why taco trucks *must* stay on the periphery—they want to remain out of sight and out of the minds of individuals like Officer Maldonado and undercover ICE agents posing as contractors so that *loncheras* may protect themselves *and* their clientele. Rather than advocate for their rights in public space, they *prefer* to avoid participation in groups like the New Orleans Food Truck Coalition in order to stay out of the spotlight. If challenging the normative spatial use of a sidewalks and a side streets is problematic, then wouldn't *lonchera* owners further stir the pot by becoming active members in the struggle to improve food truck policy? Yes, but it's also possible that their involvement would give them a voice and mobility. Mobilization and member-led organization in New Orleans has proven to be productive especially in regards to successes of the Congress of Day Laborers. Even though many of these leaders are undocumented, it is precisely this lack of papers and the

rhetoric around that status that empowers these individuals to stand up to the local, national, and supranational powers.

This emphasis on documentation, *on papers,* charts the experiences of *lonchera* vendors in New Orleans onto the larger political economy of entrepreneurship and policing. These narratives of *lonchera* owners and workers illustrate how individuals must navigate systems that fail to consider the issues (and the people) most in need. Dominant notions of culture and cultural production are, instead, idealized (the gourmet food truck) and the realities of the workers are neglected. What does not fit within that imaginary is interpreted as criminal or unhygienic (or both), and therefore vilified, banned, and policed. Even as these taco truck trailers embody all aspects of free market enterprises—defiant, borderless, lucrative, and private—they remain disenfranchised. The day laborers, too, as the byproducts of these unregulated systems, become targets of surveillance and kept at a liminal state—rendered deportable and disposable. The context of culture, especially within neoliberal markets, puts the culture to work, rather than understanding the complexity of the culture *with* the work and how the two function in tandem.[41] These policy limitations that fail to consider local as well as transnational realities must be called out through mobilization and acts of resistance along with coordination and active participation in crafting these policies

Chapter Four:

A Tale of Two Telas: A Transnational Struggle for Place

Back when I drove Luís to organize day laborers at the *esquinas*, he often requested we stop at a Honduran restaurant called Tela Café. At that point, Tela Café was located in the Broadmoor neighborhood, hidden in the corner of a strip mall. Luís claimed that they had the best *pollo con tajadas*—large pieces of fried chicken on a bed of fried plantains with a generous pile of shredded cabbage, pickled onions, and topped with *aderezo,* a sauce similar to Russian dressing. As the cooks prepared our dishes, Luís and I waited at a table catching the middle of a *telenovela* or listening to *ranchera* music playing just a little too loudly on the large speakers in the background. By the end of our rounds, between ten and eleven in the morning, Tela Café was already packed with Latinx men eating *caldo de res* (beef stews) or *baleadas* and, on Fridays, slinging *micheladas* to get an early start on the weekend.

When Luís moved back to Honduras, I continued going to Tela Café every couple of months, always checking in with the owners, whom I had befriended. Originally from Honduras, Carolina and her daughters, Victoria, Ceci, and Noemi Ramirez are all undocumented, yet despite their precarious status, they have managed to establish a steady, successful, and authorized business since 2008. Like many of the newer Latinx food establishments, Tela Café is emblematic of the New Orleans post-Katrina recovery

community as it serves as a gathering space and offers employment for Latinx workers. Tela Café functions as more than just a restaurant offering familiar foods in the Mid-City neighborhood; it is also a party setting where identities are forged through viewing soccer games, playing music, drinking beer, and watching performances. Victoria said, “We are like home,” referencing the significance of her restaurant for the Latinx working class communities.

At the same time, the construction of a two billion dollar hospital complex less than a mile from Tela Café has rendered the restaurant and its patrons vulnerable to gentrification, as rent prices rise and boutiques sprout up, making way for a wealthier population in this historically working class neighborhood. The hospital construction initially offered a job opportunity to Latinx workers looking for construction work. Now, rising prices in the neighborhood threaten their ability to live and work there. For the owners of Tela Café, the same economic forces that drew them to New Orleans and bring in their clientele—rebuilding efforts, the hospital projects, and a growing service industry economy—are the very same forces causing the gentrification that could price them out. In this sense, the same federal system that fostered the arrival of these Latinx workers, who continue to do the city’s unregulated and underpaid jobs, is the same system that is pushing them out by bankrolling private mega-projects, displacing residents and using ICE as an instrument to control this undocumented community.[1]

Victoria, Noemi and Ceci’s father, Santiago, still lives in a small town outside of Tela, Honduras. Like his daughters, he runs a business: a small bar and snack hut in a tiny village called Marión. His town is surrounded by homogenous landscapes of seemingly endless African palm oil plantations, which are steadily seizing land near local

communities like Santiago's. Nearby, a massive resort reinforced by the Honduran military is displacing longstanding Garifuna communities in order to build on the Caribbean coastline. It was only after I visited Santiago at his bar in Marión that I was able to grasp the transnational links connecting their respective experiences in grappling with mega-projects, corporatism, and policing. This chapter uses the Ramirez family and Tela Café as a case study to examine global trends of development, looking transnationally at the impacts of private-public projects on local communities in both New Orleans and Honduras. For Santiago's bar, palm oil companies co-opt local resources, and tourist mega-projects seize land from established communities without regard to the people inhabiting that territory. For Tela Café, the gentrification of the Mid-City neighborhood serves the interests of private developers and banks and disregards the people that make the neighborhood (and city) function and give it character. In both places, patterns of public-private partnerships directly push people out of these communities.

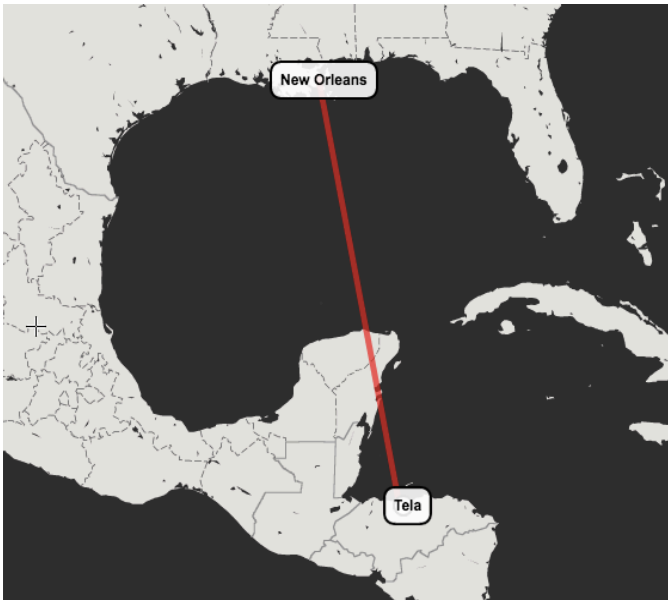

Figure 10: The route from New Orleans to Tela.

This corporatism follows the historical and geographical paradigm of neocolonialism, particularly of the United Fruit Company, headquartered in New Orleans during the first half of the twentieth century. Like contemporary models of corporate

imperialism, the company used U.S. military bases in Honduras and local, corrupt law enforcement to sustain its unrestrained enterprise that occupied hundreds of thousands of acres in Honduras.[2] The colonial legacy of this unfettered capitalism is evident near Santiago's bar in Marión where many of the surrounding palm oil plantations have absorbed former United Fruit Company property into their land holdings. New mega-resorts, too, in Honduras have incorporated old United Fruit Company land and buildings into their infrastructure. These private industries grow without regard for the environment and continue to contribute to the destruction of local economies and communities, creating a continuous displacement of people.

In this sense, rural migrants are violently forced out from their ancestral lands because of growing multinational and state-sponsored industries. Corrupt police and military back the interests of the businesses rather than the displaced people by either turning a blind eye to perpetrators of violence or committing the acts themselves. Hondurans affected by these land grabs, along with gang and narco-trafficking violence, have few or no safe and viable options for remaining in the country, and many flee to the United States. With extreme regulation and limited options for legal entry, they are often forced to do so without authorization. Once in the United States the workers fill low wage jobs in construction and service industry sectors. As these individuals work and settle with their families, they are constantly forced to defend their cultural and political right to be in the United States. Threats of deportation for their illegal entry are their most salient danger; losing their housing due to evictions or climbing rents is another major concern. There are no guarantees. The struggle begins as a right to their land in their country of origin and then shifts to a fight for their right to their city. Both state and capital,

oftentimes working in tandem, are the culprits of vulnerability for these communities and their continuous displacement first in Honduras, then in New Orleans.

Both in the case of New Orleans and the area surrounding Tela, violence and crime continue to be major factors in justifying the development of these mega-projects. The department of Atlantida, which houses Tela, ranks as one of the most violent regions in Honduras. Overall, Honduras has two cities ranked in the top five most dangerous cities in the world. [3] Similarly, New Orleans ranks as the thirty-second most violent city globally, just behind U.S. cities like St. Louis and Detroit.[4] The Tulane Avenue area near Tela Café is a notorious block in the city, considered a "magnet for crime" by the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD), with a reputation of illicit trades in sex work and drugs.[5] Instead of fostering programs that would support and improve these existing communities, developers see this as an opportunity to overhaul these spaces. And, they see post-Katrina New Orleans (2005) as well as post-coup Honduras (2009) as blank slates for neoliberal reforms like charter schools, model cities programs, and irresponsible tax credits. Arlene Davila argues, "The sanitization of space is often accompanied by the extension of neoliberal privatization logics that demand culture to be ordered and orderly."[6] Thus, rampant violence justifies the excessive policing and criminalization of these communities to ostensibly deliver this order, even though the rampant violence is oftentimes perpetuated by the state and/or failures of the state.

These predatory actions fall into Naomi Klein's concept of disaster capitalism in which corporate entities exploit crises in order to pass policies and invest in areas, when the affected communities are unable to protect themselves from such ventures.[7] Touted as job creators and as neighborhood renaissances, these private efforts end up destroying

local networks, forcing people to relocate to the periphery of cities, or to migrate across borders. Public and private partnerships—with the public assuming the most risk—fund these brand new mega-projects that disregard local culture and snub redevelopment of existing infrastructures, like Charity Hospital in New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina, the city's Charity Hospital, which served the indigent population, was flooded dramatically. Rather than reopen the historic, Charity Hospital with its iconic Art Deco design, just blocks down Tulane Avenue from Tela Café, the city ushered in two new massive hospital complexes. The area slated for the new facility was home to forty-nine residences and twenty-eight commercial buildings in a major section of Mid-City. The buildings were all moved or demolished, displacing approximately 70 families.[8] In Honduras, large-scale public/private projects force out existing local economies in order to support tourism ventures that pander to the elite, outside markets. In both cases these development projects push out the working class people that have made these places their homes and have forged their own communities.

Dávila captures this tension and false promise of public/private developments positing, "it is to erode the illusion that neoliberal planning is fostering democratic spaces, when it is whitewashed, upscale, and segregated developments that are being built and promoted."[9] Under a neoliberal structure, developers anticipate profit vis-à-vis the culture and the place, yet Dávila argues that place must be valued in terms that go beyond its market value in a way that considers and values the realities of the neighborhood—the labor, the leisure, the communities, the vice. Whether speculating a coastline in Honduras or appraising a vacant hotel on Tulane Avenue in New Orleans, Dávila calls for a way to put value not just on the architecture or the culture, but to

understand (not colonize) the cultural agents in these communities. Doing so, public investments will identify and prioritize the needs of the people rather than the profits of the developers.

Sharon Zukin examines this power dynamic between state, capital, and local communities, arguing that private investors have commodified the uniqueness of neighborhoods, maximizing on this commodification to raise rents, demolish structures, and create "homogenizing forces of redevelopment".[10] Like Dávila, Zukin argues that gentrification aims to strip and commodify culture from communities and leaves the cultural workers—like the Ramirez family at Tela Café, Santiago, and the Garifuna communities—behind. Zukin's uses the phrase "restore city's soul" to counter the homogenous landscapes that she fears so much, but this call is limited and too reductionist.[11] Zukin attempts to unpack this concept through the use of the terms "authenticity" and "origins" positing that, that authenticity is "a continuous process of living and working, a gradual buildup of everyday experience, the expectation that neighbors and buildings that are here today will be here tomorrow."[12] This argument has salient points, but it is hard to understand who can justifiably make claims to the "moral right to a city." Through her analysis of the migrant food vendors in Red Hook, Brookyln, draws in the rights of newer Latinx populations and she defends the vendors' right to the city, but by virtue of being recent arrivals, this group poses a challenge to her "origins" framework.

Andrew Ross grapples with the paradox of developers who rely on this migrant labor stating, "Large-scale developers and their contractors benefit directly (and rapaciously) from the ready availability of their undocumented labor. Indeed, some of the

loudest notes in the pro-immigrant chorus have been sounded by managers of the home-building industry."[13] Ross illustrates the tension between the concomitant need for the undocumented workers for development projects and the lack of public services for these workers. Ross adequately addresses these shortcomings of developers (and the city officials), particularly when considering issues like housing. Ross states, "Undocumented immigration is not going to stop anytime soon, though it is being pushed further underground. It might be best, then, to start thinking about balancing the housing, employment, and commuting needs of immigrants in a more or less permanent way."[14] In this sense, these issues take on a much more global scope, beyond just the city, the barrio, or the coastal community, that examines the transnational realities of these communities in order to appropriately understand and respond to the neoliberal policies. Using the case study of the two Telas—Victoria, Ceci, and Noemi in Tela Café in New Orleans and Santiago's bar near Tela, Honduras—this chapter delves into these issues to analyze the global impacts of gentrification and corporate imperialism.

Tela Café

Carolina, the founder of Tela Café, arrived first to Houston in the early 2000s after separating from her husband, Santiago, who remained

Figure 11: Inside Tela Café the Ramirez sisters serve customers. Photo by Fernando Lopez.

behind with their children near Tela. After having settled in Houston, Carolina sent for her three daughters—Ceci, Victoria, and Noemi—to join her in Texas. The two younger daughters, Victoria and Noemi, had been living mostly with their grandparents in Tela. Ceci, the eldest daughter, lived about twenty kilometers away from Tela in a village called Marión, just blocks from their father. The three women moved to the United States to attend school and help their mother. Victoria, Carolina's middle daughter, came to the United States at age fifteen. She said that in Houston her mother had a passion for the kitchen: "She always loved cooking, Saturdays and Sundays she made food in her house, she invited friends over." But, it wasn't until after Hurricane Katrina that Carolina made cooking her primary job.

In October 2005, two months after Katrina, Carolina, arrived to the devastated city to help clean up, rebuild, and sell food. Victoria describes that time period: "when it [Katrina] first happened, for months there was nobody. Mom brought her car full of food from Houston, and there wasn't water, it was difficult. Little by little we went out to sell food in the streets; we sold food out of a van for the workers that were rebuilding." Carolina began working with a crew to clear out damaged schools, removing trash, desks, tables, and other school supplies. She had one goal: to earn enough capital to start her own restaurant. And, she wanted to open the restaurant immediately, recognizing the need to feed the high numbers of Latinx reconstruction workers. Soon after, the three daughters joined her permanently, this time arriving from Houston. They woke up early each morning to provide coffee and breakfast for Latinx workers in the Broadmoor neighborhood. Word spread about the good food, convenience, and affordability.

With this reputation, Carolina, Ceci, Victoria, and Noemi began selling food out of their rental home in the Broadmoor neighborhood, installing a few tables in the patio. They handed out cards to their customers letting them know that they now had a place to come and sit down. Their in-home enterprise took them off the streets and out of the purview of law enforcement, but they still had no licensing. At this point their clientele—mostly men from Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico—expanded significantly. The women recognized that they needed to move into a much larger space with greater capacity to feed people; they needed an industrial-sized kitchen to make and store the food. And, they needed even more tables for people to sit. As the city began to recover and operations normalized, police officers became less willing to turn a blind eye to their unlicensed enterprise. The large numbers of cars parked around their Broadmoor home attracted the attention of law enforcement. So did the ad hoc karaoke nights with slurred versions of Juan Gabriel and Enrique Iglesias belting from the speakers.

Carolina said that while the officers forced them to close the in-home operation, they encouraged them to get the correct permits to legitimize their business. Despite their undocumented immigration status, they were still able to apply for a business license through the help of friends that are U.S. citizens and through an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) number. Any undocumented person can apply for an ITIN number with a foreign passport or birth certificate. ITINs consist of nine digits and are only used for federal tax reporting. The ITIN number provides an alternative Social Security Number, thus allowing for an Employer Identification number, which grants a person access to register a business and satisfies the requirements of the IRS.[15] This number enables undocumented entrepreneurs to operate within a legal system,

legitimized by a nine-digit number. On April 15, 2008, they acquired the appropriate licensing and eventually found a spot in the Gert Town neighborhood in what used to be Skip's Soulfood and Catering. The women had saved up approximately $80,000 from their work cleaning up and selling food on the streets. This capital would go into fixing up their newly acquired restaurant space—purchasing kitchen equipment, new furniture, and paying the deposit to rent the space.

I first visited Tela Café in the fall of 2010. Located on a busy road right off Carrollton Avenue and Earhart, the tight space contained a small front section with a walk up window and approximately four booths. A closed glass door connected the eating area to the bar, which opened into a much larger space with pool tables, a full bar, and more tables to sit down. While I ate *pollo con tajadas* for the first time, my friends and I watched as customers quickly filled the bar, orders changed from *taquitos* to Coronas, and the music got louder leading into the Friday night. Their tenure on Earhart Avenue lasted a little less than three years. According to Victoria, the owners of the restaurant wanted the space back in order to open their own restaurant. Victoria posits, "When she [Carolina] first chose to rent this restaurant there was nothing. My mom installed the ventilation pipe for the stove, bought her own tables, and everything. But the lady wanted her restaurant back. We eventually moved to another place, it took my mom a long time." In some ways their experience on Earhart Avenue is a microcosm of the treatment of this Latinx community throughout the city; they come in, invest, revitalize, and restore an area. Once that area has become operational and (re)desirable, they are pushed out. The Ramirez family lost their investment in the Earhart restaurant once the

owners sought it out; they felt they had no legitimate claim to the establishment and were forced to leave it behind.

Victoria said the stress of closing the Earhart restaurant (and losing the investment) weighed heavy on Carolina, who fell into depression. But, their business did not stop. Carolina and her daughters sold food once again out of their house in the nearby Broadmoor neighborhood. They needed to maintain consistency with their clientele because they did not want to be forgotten. Victoria said that in between restaurants "we always sold food in the house. We never stopped. Thank God that our customers always, wherever we go, they're always there, the same customers." During this hiatus, Noemi and Victoria worked intermittently in hotels and cleaning houses; Ceci and Carolina maintained the kitchen. After they spent eight months furtively selling food out of their home, the women moved into a restaurant on the cusp of the Mid-City and Broadmoor neighborhoods, tucked into a small strip mall next to Aeren's Supermarket. The new space was compact and cozy with an open kitchen and limited seating. The minimalist décor consisted of a Honduran flag, Corona posters, and two televisions stuck on soccer games, *telenovelas,* or *Caso Cerrado*—the Judge Judy of Latin America. A large PA system installed in the back corner of the restaurant was used to full capacity on the weekends when Tela Café transformed from restaurant to club. As their clientele grew, they knew they needed a larger space to accommodate the crowd. Carolina and her daughters remained in this space for a little over a year. For the third time in three years, they packed up their restaurant and moved, this time to Tulane and Broad, where they have been a mainstay for this Latinx community since 2013.

Tela Café's current location on Tulane Avenue is set diagonally from the Orleans Parish Criminal Courthouse. The façade of the Honduran restaurant does not resemble a restaurant as it blends in with the bail bondsmen centers and residential homes that line the street adjacent to the courthouses and jail. On the front exterior of the restaurant a white sign juts out from above the main entrance advertising "Delicious Diner Restaurant and Bar" in large yellow and orange letters. These words overshadow the small blue font directly below that reads "Tela Café." The signage gives little reference to what is hidden within this space—a Honduran restaurant, bar, and club with slot machines, a pool table, and stage. To the public, the sign "Delicious Diner" renders confusion, offering a generic name for a restaurant that one would anticipate contains a menu full of hamburgers, club sandwiches, and mediocre etouffees and gumbos. Tela Café, the restaurant's official name, alludes to its Honduran origins, referring to the coastal town of Tela and its actual menu boasts of traditional Honduran dishes that range from *baleadas* and *pollo con tajadas* to conch soup and even a grilled iguana plate.

The building with salmon color siding, white trim, tinted windows and wrought iron entrance advertises two Louisiana Gaming signs posted on either wall of the corner lot and a florescent "open" sign that lights up

Figure 12: Map of Mid-City New Orleans with Tela Café and the hospital complex isolated.

the front door. Inside Tela Café, an open-floor plan allows space for ample seating, extending back to a stage, and even further back to a lone pool table with surrounding slot machines. The front half of the restaurant offers remnants of the 1940s, with an old-style, built-in bar wrapped in an L-shape around the front half of the space. Considering its proximity to the courthouses and other city offices, it is easy to imagine the space as a watering hole for midcentury judges and attorneys stopping by after a long day's work. Tela Café continues to be a watering hole for workers, but now the restaurant serves the predominantly male day laborer population the live and work in the neighborhood.

Many of these Latinx laborers continue reconstruction efforts, which include temporary work on the $2 billion dollar hospital mega-project, just five blocks south of Tela Café. Bound between Canal and Tulane Avenues, the 70-acre hospital complex consists of the University Medical Center (UMC) and Veteran's Hospital and was built mostly using federal hurricane recovery money. As the massive medical facility continues to bring more professionals to the neighborhood, it further spurs gentrification by pricing out families and displacing established businesses.[16] During the construction of the hospital complex, the Mid-City neighborhood experienced a commercial and real estate boom, despite doubts about the hospitals' future viability. In just three years, the price per square foot of these residential housing increased from $90 in 2012 to $199 in 2015.[17] In total the UMC and Veteran's hospitals are projected to bring in 17,000 jobs to the area. To keep up with the hospitals and new businesses, the state has already invested in $4.8 million in beautification project on Tulane Avenue paid for by the Louisiana Department of Transportation. The overall investment is projected to be $12 million and will include roadway construction, sidewalk reconstruction, lighting, and landscaping.[18]

The owners of Tela Café have not yet experienced the rental increases from these improvements; however, they have paid attention as neighboring businesses have been demolished and new demographics have come in. For example, just blocks away from Tela Café, a white-owned BBQ restaurant that touts a daily menu with seasonal ingredients, just opened in December 2016, replacing a Honduran restaurant that closed in 2014. The restaurant, in all of its goodness, is a harbinger for the anticipated whitened "renaissance" of this Mid-City corridor. Directly in front of Tela Café, improvements have already taken place with the reconstruction and expansion of the sidewalk and the curb. Meanwhile, longstanding infrastructures are sold off or torn down. La Petite Motel, which sits directly across the street from Tela Café, is up for sale. The structure adjacent to the Le Petit motel, the Patio Motel, burned down in 2015 and has since been demolished, making way for the next boutique or craft brewery.[19]

At the same time, several new businesses and restaurants are popping up along this corridor. Just seven blocks down the street 504 Craft Beer Reserve opened, a self-ascribed upscale retail store. A gastropub called Treo opened up a few blocks north of Tela Café, featuring chef Michael Gulotta, a James Beard semifinalist for best chefs in America in 2016.[20] Old institutions on the avenue like Nick's Big Train Bar, which opened in 1918 but closed after Hurricane Betsy in 1965, are making a resurgence.[21] These new, hip businesses fit within what Zukin calls the new model or paradigm of urban experience defined by gentrification.[22] These new models of urban aesthetic bring things like boutiques, breweries, and loft apartments redefining the standard as high rents and high-end retail spaces. Neighborhood trends are changing and redefined by the middle and upper class or businesses claiming to be job makers rather than addressing,

improving, and embracing the actually realities and needs of the Mid-City neighborhood.[23]

The Mid-City neighborhood became hub for the thousands of Latinx workers that arrived after Katrina, settling with their families in the heart of New Orleans roughly between Orleans and Tulane Avenues.[24] In a report done by the Data Center Research, Latinxs made up 10% of the Mid-City neighborhood before Katrina; by 2013, this percentage increased to 15.2%, just 1% below the nationwide average.[25] Walking down Banks Street, a main corridor that cuts through Mid-City, Latinx families hang out on the porches of craftsman bungalows and shotgun homes while their kids play on the sidewalks out front. Construction workers covered in paint and carrying tools stop by El Paraiso corner store to buy a beverage on their way home from a long day's work. Further down the street, where Banks Street meets Carrolton Avenue, sits Esperanza Charter School, which opened in 2007. The K-8 school features ESL classes for its approximately 50% Latinx population.[26] On Jefferson Davis Parkway in Mid-City, Puentes Nola, a non-profit organization whose goal is to "support the inclusion of Latinos in public, political and socio-economic life" began its advocacy for the Latinx community in 2007. Puentes works with voter rights, housing rights, and helps provide Latinxs access to local resources.

Further down the block, on Jefferson Davis Parkway, the First Grace United Methodist Church offers a Latinx ministry every Sunday. The church also sponsors a program called La Semilla, which provides free English as a Second Language (ESL) courses every Tuesday and Thursday nights. The Congress of Day Laborers holds their

weekly Wednesday night meetings in the sanctuary of the First Grace United Methodist Church with over 200 members in attendance each week. Affiliated with First Grace United Methodist Church and located nearby, Hagar's House offers a "sanctuary for women and children in New Orleans" and has provided refuge for Latinx victims of domestic violence. Hagar's House also hosts Project Ishmael, a small immigration legal clinic for children, focusing on the unaccompanied minors that arrived from Central America in 2013.

Even ICE officers temporarily relocated their privatized electronic monitoring device distribution center, BI Incorporated, to Mid-City. For over two years, BI Incorporated's office sat just four houses down from the Ideal Market, the largest grocery store in New Orleans that caters predominantly to the Latinx population. BI Incorporated is a subsidiary of the GEO Group, which has investments of over $3 billion in the private prison and immigration detention center industry; these numbers are expected to increase under the Trump administration. ICE mandates undocumented individuals that are under deportation processes to go to BI Incorporated to install the ankle bracelets—a humiliating and dehumanizing experience for these individuals. The bracelets track and monitor these individuals, and can only be accessed through the BI Incorporated office.

After 2005, along with these businesses, schools, and organizations, Mid-City saw a large increase in Latinx-owned restaurants, grocery stores, and bars to accompany the few pre-Katrina Cuban-owned businesses like Regla Grocery Store (formerly Garces Restaurant) and Santos Automotive. Established businesses in Mid-City even shifted their scope to cater more towards this new Latinx clientele by filling their shelves with Latin American products and hiring bilingual staff. For example, prior to Katrina, Ideal

Market had one corner store with a meat market that predominantly served the Black community. Since 2005, the Kaki family, originally from the Middle East, expanded Ideal Market to include six chain stores located across the Greater New Orleans area, Baton Rouge, and Houma. After Katrina, the Kaki family maximized on the potential of this new Latinx population swapping out Blue Runner beans for Goya brand, expanding its marketing on Spanish-language radio stations, and hiring Latinxs to work as cooks in their kitchens and cashiers in their stores. Many other restaurants, bars, and grocery stores popped up along this neighborhood understanding the economic potential of this new, Spanish-speaking population.[27] Approximately thirteen Latinx food establishments can be found throughout the Mid-City neighborhood along with intermittent taco trucks and ubiquitous but clandestine tamale vendors.

Signs posted throughout the Mid-City neighborhood's Spanish-language businesses advertise local music featured at Tela Café. Decorating the posters are photos of a Venezuelan singer and her band in their flashy costumes with brightly colored sequins that blend New Orleans Mardi Gras and Samba Carnival. The band plays most weekends drawing in a large, male-dominated crowd. Tela Café also advertises parties through the local radio station 105.7, *Jambalaya* Spanish-language newspaper, and through social media. Their Facebook page is filled with images of posters detailing the deal of the day along with an important soccer game or boxing match. Victoria explains that in the evening, especially on the weekends, the restaurant converts into a club. She says that once people get off from work the mood shifts and it becomes less of a restaurant and more of a place to unwind. "On the weekends, I leave at 6 p.m. and my

sister takes her shift," says Victoria, "A Saturday isn't a Saturday unless it goes until five or six in the morning and then she [Ceci] closes." She says a typical Saturday will bring in between $2,000 to $3,000 in profits, mostly off alcohol. The sisters and a crew of workers come in the next morning to clean up around 8 a.m and then they open officially at 11 a.m.

The restaurant has a reputation as a party place, and at times, this image is not favorable, especially for the neighbors living in the area. A public message on Tela Café's Facebook page said in English, "you are a pox on the neighborhood" then detailed a grievance regarding noise complaints, trash, loud music, fighting, and damage done to her car during one of these late night parties. Tela Café fosters an environment where people can have fun. And, this zone of Tulane Avenue has historically been filled with hotels, bars, and restaurants. Just a block away from Tela Café, the Tulane and Broad Avenue corner carries a particular notoriety. Richard Webster of the *Times-Picayune* calls that specific corner a "popular destination for junkies and sex workers who take watch over barren street corners after dark."[28] Webster's article quotes NOPD Officer Ricky Jackson saying, "The workers (construction workers at the hospital site) get paid Thursday, Friday, Saturday and then they go pick up the girls or guys. Sometimes they come by early morning, pick up a girl and then go to work. It's supply and demand. You see it all the time."[29] Loud music, people congregating on the street, and the occasional fight have led to police presence at Tela Café, but the staff is usually quick to deescalate the disturbance, putting an end to further patrol for the night.

Along with the warnings for these nightly disturbances, the restaurant has also come under scrutiny for infrastructural deficiencies. In one case, the restaurant was

involved in a lawsuit in November 2014 in which an air conditioner unit fell out of the wall and onto a customer's head causing "severe injuries." The plaintiff sued for damages for pain and suffering, medical expenses, and loss in wages.[30] The two sides settled for an undisclosed amount and, according to Victoria, no other major incidents have occurred at the restaurant except for the occasional noise complaint, which they are able to resolve.

Just a block down the street, Los Catrachos, another Honduran restaurant, opened up in January 2016. After operating a successful restaurant since 2006 in a strip mall in the suburbs of Metairie, the owner decided to open a second location in a strip mall in Mid-City on Tulane Avenue. The term *catrachos* is an endearing nickname for the Honduran community. The origin of the word *catracho* comes from Florencio Xatruch, a Honduran general during the 1856 Central American coalition campaign against William Walker's multinational filibuster troops. It is reported that during the war, Walker's troops would reference Xatruch's army by saying "here come the *xatruches*" and, overtime, *xatruches* converted into *catrachos.*[31] The name stuck. Los Catrachos restaurant took over the restaurant Pizzacare, a pizzeria that lasted for three years in the space, opting to leave three large paintings on the wall depicting hands making pizza dough. During a lunch there, I asked the server about the paintings and she laughed and said, "They look like *baleada* dough," referencing the Honduran-style wraps that have a thick, flakey tortilla with beans, cheese, and egg inside. The kept the artwork up.

Los Catrachos offers more of a family atmosphere and serves no alcohol at either location. The space is much quieter inside, and with only twelve tables, much smaller than Tela Café. When I asked Victoria about the new restaurant, she said that before they opened she would recognize the owner, coming into Tela Café to check out the space and

order food. “I think he just wanted to see how the business is doing,” she said, assuring me that they have different clientele and the new restaurant has not detracted from her steady stream of Latinx customers. While it may not directly compete with Tela Café for customers on the Tulane Avenue block, Los Catrachos does offer a counterpoint to Tela Café. While the menu is similar, the sanitized, sober, and reggaeton-free environment makes it a more palatable experience for the non-Latinx population.

Despite Los Catrachos’ presence, Tela Café continues to serve as an escape for the day laborer community—for entertainment and for food. Similarly, Tela Café serves as a source of stable and gainful employment for the Latinx community, particularly women. In total, Tela Café employs eight to ten people. In the fall of 2013, I met with Doña Nilda, one of the non-family member crew of workers. Nilda is a fifty-three year old Guatemalan woman who has worked for Tela Café since 2009, through its various iterations. I have known Nilda for about five years because she is also a member of the Congress of Day Laborers. We became close while rooming together in Washington D.C. during a workshop with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network in 2011. Nilda’s first language is Ki’che and she only formally started speaking Spanish since she arrived in New Orleans in 2007. She cannot read or write in any of her three languages (she speaks some English), but she makes up for that through a keen wit and sharp memory.

When I asked Nilda about her role at Tela Café she said, “I am not embarrassed to tell you that I haven’t been able to be a head cook because I am from a family from humble upbringings. So, I was never in school. I don’t know how to read. I don’t know how to write. I think that it affects me negatively because I cannot take peoples’ orders to

write them down. I can only be the assistant cook." As a cook Nilda spends most of her time making the homemade tortillas, preparing the sauces, and marinating the meats. She learned how to make Honduran food at the Tela Café restaurant and said that it is "not too different" than Guatemalan food. Nilda works the weekends at Tela Café, usually the night shift with the wilder crowd. During the week Nilda works cleaning houses for two wealthy families in the Uptown neighborhood. She specializes in garden work and cooking, but has a steady job cleaning indoors. She enjoys her job a Tela Café and appreciates Carolina and her daughters. She says they always pay on time and that if she works extra hours then she gets compensated for that work.

Nilda currently rents a house in the Mid-City neighborhood directly in front of the Veteran's Hospital. Most of her neighbors have for sale signs out front or they have already sold their homes. When I asked Nilda recently if she would have to move, she said, "Looking around the street it seems like everyone is moving. I haven't had to yet, but I haven't talked to the owner." Nilda, like many of the Latinxs that live in the area, faces the risk of being priced out by a younger, whiter demographic arriving along with the new hospitals. Much of the Black and Latinx population have already relocated to New Orleans East neighborhood, where crime rates are high, but rent is low compared to the rest of Orleans Parish. Located ten miles east from Tela Café, the Venetian Isles, a district in the neighborhood of New Orleans East, has seen the most increase in the Latinx population from 4.4% in 2000 with current levels hovering around 22% (five percent above the national average).[32] Many working class Latinx families have been forced to live in this district because of the affordability of housing, yet they work in the food service industry and in construction projects downtown. These trends will persist as

affordable housing options continue to disappear because of gentrification. And, as incentive-based mitigation efforts expire as the state fails to adequately provide housing for low-income communities.

For example, just over one mile northeast of Tela Café, the American Can Co., an industrial plant turned 268 unit housing complex, captures the limitations of these private-public incentives. In 2001, the American Can Co. received government assistance including $29 million tax-exempt bond financing from the city to convert the building in to loft apartments. In return, the developers had to provide 20% of the building as affordable housing, but policy-makers gave this clause just a fifteen-year lifespan. In January 2016, the developers gave tenants of 53 units eviction notices in order to make room for market-rate tenants. These evictees include mostly black tenants, a disabled veteran, and a 95-year-old woman.[33] This example shows the limitations of the public sector's ability to offer sustainable solutions when negotiating with the profit-driven private sector. Simply, investment into the private sector is not a viable response to mitigate the damage done by the private sector.

In the spring of 2015, the owners of Tela Café attempted to expand the restaurant by opening up a new space in Kenner. Carolina said that because of the high Latinx population living in Kenner, it just made sense to expand the business. The restaurant opened briefly in a large space off of Williams Boulevard. Carolina and Ceci were to focus on the new restaurant while Victoria and their youngest sister, Noemi, stayed behind to maintain the Tulane Avenue location. I visited the Kenner restaurant in June 2015. A large kitchen divided the restaurant in two with one side reserved predominantly

for tables and the other with a bar type atmosphere. A few families sat at tables enjoying their food, but overall the space seemed empty, but the menu was the same.

The sisters were optimistic about the restaurant because of its location and because their clientele had been the ones who suggested they open a spot in Kenner. By the fall of 2015, the restaurant kept getting hit with hurdles and finally closed after losing a permit. Victoria said that one of the partners that helped fund the restaurant had backed out of his support, and they couldn't sustain the space on their own. They had no other option but to close the restaurant. According to Victoria, when Carolina lost her investment, she became frustrated and "*se decepcionó*" (became disillusioned) with the restaurant industry. Plus, in December 2015, Carolina's 87-year-old mother had a stroke. Victoria said that Carolina realized that it was time for her to return to Honduras.

After having lived in Houston and New Orleans for the past twenty years, Carolina is now fully retired from the restaurant industry and is taking care of her mother back in Tela. Carolina's documentation status makes it difficult for her to come back to the United States or for her daughters to visit her in Tela—they would have to cross the border illegally, facing much tighter security than the first time they arrived. Victoria says that she misses her mother, but that she and her sisters have to continue working hard to keep the restaurant going so they can support their families in the United States and Honduras. In Carolina's absence the daughters have maintained the restaurant. In my most recent visit Victoria laughingly told me that now I could go visit her mother in Tela. She was still surprised and amused that I had visited her father the previous summer in 2015 at his home just outside of Tela, two thousand miles south of New Orleans.

Santiago's Bar

The week before I left for Honduras, Ceci gave me the phone number of her father, Santiago, after I visited her restaurant in Kenner. At that point I was uncertain if it would work out to visit him during my trip, but I fit it in on the last leg of my travels. Once I was in Honduras, I called several times and finally was able to reach him. Santiago explained that he lived outside the city and that I would have to come to his village to see him because he couldn't leave his business. At that point, I had no idea what his business was, but I complied and we set up a time to meet. I spent the evening before my visit with Santiago exploring the city of Tela. Venturing along the bustling main avenue, vendors offered me goods—anything from plastic flip-flops to *gifiti*—an herb-infused elixir popular among the Garifuna people. After walking through the main corridor, I cut down a well-lit side street towards the beach passing by open-air restaurants and more street vendors. I headed down the coast to La Ensenada Resort, a gated hotel and convention center built in 2005. My friend in Tegucigalpa recommended the hotel, not to stay in, but to visit, emphasizing that La Ensenada had purchased land and derelict buildings previously owned by the United Fruit Company. For much of the twentieth century, Tela was as a main hub for the United Fruit Company, even serving as the headquarters for its railroad subsidiary, Tela Railroad Company.[34]

The United Fruit Company has long ties linking Honduras to New Orleans. At a young age, Samuel Zemurray, a Jewish immigrant invested in the burgeoning fruit market that connected Central America to the United States. Moving his base to New Orleans, Zemurray purchased land in the northeastern coast of Honduras along the Cuyamel River to begin his banana industry. Facing obstructions by the Honduran and

U.S. governments—limiting access to land and resources in Honduras and placing high tariffs on trade—Zemurray organized a crew of mercenaries including Manual Bonilla, an exiled Honduran president living in New Orleans, to help orchestrate a coup. Together they overthrew the Honduran government in 1912, installing Bonilla as president and successfully expanding Zemurray's corporate interests.

Bonilla died unexpectedly in 1913, but by that point he had already paid his dues to Zemurray, granting him major concessions that included thousands of hectares of land for banana production and tariff free exports. Zemurray quickly emerged at the forefront of the banana trade. New Orleans served as a hub for this early banana republic providing port-to-port access between the United States and Honduras through the Mississippi River, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Sea. Zemurray's capitalist zeal created one of the first giant agribusinesses—rife with corruption, racial segregation, suppression of labor rights, and environmental degradation—paving the way for future generations of corporate imperialism, swallowing up land and establishing autonomous governing systems.[35]

Along with Zemurray's notoriety, remnants of the United Fruit Company—from buildings to foundations—are scattered throughout New Orleans. Most notably, the former headquarters located in the Central Business District at 321 St. Charles Avenue is now Fidelity Homestead Savings Bank. Zemurray's former southern colonial revival mansion is the presidential home at Tulane University. Similar vestiges of the United Fruit Company's controversial legacy remain in Honduras. Like the other major fruit industries during that time period, United Fruit colonized and developed areas along the

coast of Atlántida, constructing factories for production, offices, warehouses, and homes for high-ranking workers.

Back in Tela, La Ensenada Resort includes the refurbished houses that once made up part the corporate enclave of the United Fruit Company. Historian Ronald Harpelle considers these areas to be “the white zones” with “planned communities constructed to house the families of managers, mechanics, engineers, and other skilled workers of European decent.”[36] Not much has changed. A large metal fence bolstered by a forest of thick palm trees line the periphery of the gated compound as affluent tourists relax inside. Modeled off the American bungalow style architecture left behind during the first half of the twentieth century, yellow painted cottages and large convention center halls accommodate the tourists that visit Tela on business and pleasure. Inside the compound, multiple pools, a Tiki bar, and a restaurant serve elite clientele visiting from Honduras and elsewhere. Only a fifth of the projected resort plan has been completed.

My time at La Ensendada was brief. My white skin and English language granted me access through the beachfront entrance, which seemed reserved for guests. Once inside, I explored the compound, finding a plaque commemorating the United Fruit Company’s presence in Tela. After ordering a drink from the poolside bar, the bartender asked for a room number to which to charge my drink. I explained that I preferred to pay in cash and reached in my pocket for Lempiras, the local currency. The bartender instructed me in English that La Ensenada did not accept Lempiras and I could only pay with a credit card. That experience confirmed my expectations, and satisfied my curiosity—I had a firsthand account of the continuities of these “white zones” that

continue to occupy massive amounts of land and segregate people based on race and class. After that drink, I returned to my hotel in order to call and confirm my visit with Santiago the next day.

Santiago's gruff voice over the phone instructed me that a car would be waiting the next morning at my hotel in Tela. He said his driver would meet me at nine in the morning to take me approximately twenty kilometers to his place located in the village of Marión. At this point, I did not know what to expect from Santiago or his place, except that Santiago was difficult to reach and I knew he only had an hour to talk the next morning. Antonio, a forty-year-old man in a dilapidated white Toyota Tercel taxi, arrived on time at my hotel greeting me with a strong handshake and an awkward "Hello, how are you?" mumbled in English. I brought some comfort to Antonio by introducing myself in Spanish and then briefly explaining my connections to Santiago. I told him that I was a student; that I knew Santiago's family in New Orleans; and that I was interviewing him to get a better idea about what and whom they left behind in Honduras. In the car, Antonio quickly explained that he, too, has family in New Orleans. He said that he wanted to go there to work too, but opted to stay in Tela to be a taxi driver. Antonio said he had worked for the past several years driving for his longtime friend, Santiago.

As we left the city limits of Tela, residential areas with parks and soccer fields quickly transitioned into industrial buildings, warehouses, factories, and the small Tela Airport. We headed west towards Marión on Carretera 13 (CA-13), a four-lane interstate that spans across northeastern Honduras—from Puerto Cortes to San Pedro Sula. With the tinted windows halfway down, we watched as the landscape changed from industrial to rural homogeneity with fields after fields of African palm consuming the roadside.

Large, open-back trucks passed us by carrying recently harvested African palm fruit piled precariously high. Growing in dense, pumpkin-sized clusters and planted in meticulous rows, the individual reddish fruits resemble a cross between an acorn and a cherry with the coarseness of a pineapple. The seeds and the pulp are used in cooking oils, soaps, and most lucratively in biofuels, making up a growing agroindustry that produces and exports the oils.

African palms have gradually replaced the banana industry in this region, occupying buildings and land once owned by United Fruit Company/Chiquita Brands. Labor historian Dana Frank stated that when Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras in 1998 killing 5,657 people, Chiquita lost one hundred percent of its 1999 banana crop. In many cases, instead of replanting for the next season, many of the plantations closed down their banana operations and replanted these lands with African palm.[37] These plantations have increased significantly since Hurricane Mitch, capitalizing on the disaster. According to the World Wildlife Fund, approximately 300 football fields are cleared every hour in Honduras to plant African palms.[38] Honduras ranks eighth in the world in palm oil production and third in Latin America (behind Ecuador and Colombia) with the palm fruit producing 300,000,000 kilograms annually.[39] It increasingly contributes to environmental and labor concerns as agroindustry owners thrive in the comfort of little oversight by the Honduran government.

U.S. food industries have increasingly become dependent on palm oil, thus further feeding the demand for the growth of these plantations. U.S. consumption of palm oil doubled from 2005 to 2012 exporting 2.7 billion pounds per year, responding to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) requirement in 2006 that U.S.

manufacturers label trans fats in food products.[40] Palm oil is a substitute for these unwanted trans fat. More recently, the demand for palm oil climbed after the FDA banned the use of artificial trans fats in 2015.[41] As anticipated, palm oil became the number one alternative, seeing supplies increase by a half billion pounds per year in the United States. Experts recommend that palm oil is not the ideal substitute for the artificial trans fat because of the high levels of saturated fats and because of its detrimental impacts on the environment, as one of the leading causes of deforestation.[42] Recognizing the seemingly inevitable growth of this industry, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has credulously signed contracts with corporations that produce palm oil. WWF seeks to pressure these corporations to create more sustainable practices and mitigate the extent of future damage done by these capitalist endeavors.

After about ten miles on CA-13, Antonio and I turned onto a small, unpaved road marked only by wooden bus stop and a small corner store. We slowed down; the car's pace was at the mercy of the narrow dirt road filled with potholes, small ravines, and the occasional herd of pigs. Antonio explained that he would soon invest in a truck that would allow for a much faster ride. In the meantime, we continued the last leg of the drive at a meager ten miles per hour, adding on an additional hour to the drive. For the majority of the trip, African palms towered over our heads and Antonio explained his experience working in the African palm industry—planting, pruning, and harvesting the fruits for processing. "It was a good job," he claimed, "although the work had difficult, long hours, but it was satisfying and paid well." He explained in detail the harvesting process, pointing to the trees with tops chopped off: "Once they get too tall, you have to

chop them off with a long blade. It is hard work, but the plants stop producing (fruit) and it is time to make way for the new ones." Antonio worked in the palm oil industry for approximately fifteen years, but decided a few years ago to become a taxi driver to have more flexible hours.

After driving for thirty minutes through the African palm plantations, we could see smoke rising from the tops of the trees, which Antonio said came from a factory a couple of miles ahead. He said that the giant caldrons at the factory processed the African palm seed and pulp to produce the oil. The oil would then be shipped from the factory to San Pedro Sula for export. As we approached the factory and the accompanying small town, it was clear that the community was wealthier than the other small areas we passed. We stopped in front of a row of worn down bungalow houses that still maintained the character and framework of the renovated bungalows at La Ensenada. "Those were from the United Fruit," explained Antonio, "Now the (palm oil) factory managers and their families live there."

A woman in her early twenties came running from the house to our car. She looked at me and spoke perfect English, "Where are you going? Can I get a ride back into town?" I explained that we were headed to Marión and we would be back through in an hour. She switched over to Spanish, asking the same question to Antonio. He explained in more detail the plan, to her chagrin; she wanted to go immediately to Tela. We left without further questioning. Antonio said that she was probably a daughter of one of the owners or administrators of the factory and that she likely had studied in the United States. It struck me that the vestiges of the United Fruit Company have been absorbed by the newer waves of corporate conglomerates invested in the production and sale of palm

oil. I later confirmed that the San Alejo Company, part of the Grupo Jaremar Corporation, bought up much of the plantations formerly owned by the United Fruit Company, expanding their monopoly to 14,500 hectares in the Tela region.[43]

In 2014, Grupo Jaremar signed a loan agreement with the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) for over twenty million dollars to fund new capital expenditures in Honduras for palm oil production. The corporations used violence and job creation as justifications for the expansion, positing in their report that, "Honduras has been plagued by the crime and the drug trade in recent years, and is one of the Western Hemisphere's poorest countries. Through this loan, the company will be able to provide employment opportunities and continue to benefit the local community through the support of philanthropic programs."[44] The report summary nods to environmental protection measures stating, "The borrower represents that no land will be acquired as a result of the project. Project activities will not impact Indigenous Peoples and its operations are not located near any sensitive cultural heritage areas." Moreover, Grupo Jaremar signed a contract with the WWF in 2014 stating its commitment to "develop activities that identify, reduce and mitigate environmental impacts and thus achieve the strategic objectives established in the program of agriculture and environment of the Mesoamerican Reef (MAR)."[45] Within these deregulated systems there is little oversight to ensure that any of these conditions—philanthropic, job producing, or conservational—be met.

Antonio and I continued another twenty minutes to Marión, driving on the same dirt road, but now parallel to the San Alejo River. The San Alejo River was more of a

creek in size, dissecting the massive land reserved exclusively for African palm. Antonio made it clear that the land was divided up between just two wealthy individuals that owned the thousands of acres that we passed through to get to Marión. At last, we arrived in the small village. The community was dense, consisting of houses, a small school with outdoor classrooms, and some municipal offices. Men and women sat outside their homes tending to plants or cleaning out equipment. Nets hung to dry, strewn out across the trees in several yards. “This is a fishing community,” said Antonio, “Or at least it used to be.”

We pulled up to a modest commercial structure painted white with no walls and a flat roof covering three pool tables. A rundown white picket fence surrounded the structure with blue and white banner hanging from one fencepost to another. An image of a giant lifesaver advertised “Salva Vida,” a local beer. Dangling from the roof hung a strand of sail signs with “Barena” written across each triangle with a picture of an ice-cold bottle of beer on a beach. Giant black speakers propped up in two corners vibrated with the faint sounds of reggaeton in the background. If needed, the bar seemed capable of providing surround sound for the entire town. A small indoor space contained three pool tables, each covered for protection. On one exterior wall hung a variety of snack-sized potato chips. Four white merchandise refrigerators lined the rest of the wall with a giant cooler at the bottom. It was clear that his space specialized in three areas—beer, pool, and snacks.

A man in his early sixties, dressed in a white tank-top and khaki pants, emerged from behind the white picket fence. His gruff voice seemed much gentler in person as he shook my hand and introduced himself, “I am Santiago; this is my bar. And my house.”

The other men posted up along the fence laughed. I introduced myself and made small talk, asking about the bar. Santiago invited me in, offering me a Coca-Cola. He bragged about his pool tables and explained about what good care he takes of them. I could tell—for outdoor pool tables they seemed in much better shape than many of the indoor tables I had seen in New Orleans. Santiago asked about his daughters. I told him that they are well and explained about their venture to open the new restaurant. He already knew everything I told him: he talks daily by phone to at least one of his three daughters. Santiago excused himself momentarily, going inside. He came out with his cellphone and handed it to me. It was Ceci, his eldest daughter. I spoke briefly with her, mentioning the trip to Tela and thanking her for the generosity of her family. The call was filled with static and ended abruptly, but long enough to gather that all parties were surprised that I had actually made it to Marión.

I continued talking with Santiago about his bar and life in the village. Santiago explained that he had always been in the hospitality business and that he enjoyed being at the center of the town. "Most of the guys come to watch soccer here or they come after work. Some are regulars," he said pointing at two of the men sitting on coolers. It was before noon and they already seemed well underway in their patronage and beer consumption. Santiago said that people came from the neighboring villages to hang out at the bar and he has the most business during the weekends. When I asked if he serves food he responded, "Just beer and snacks, that's all I really sell. And cigarettes. I don't cook, I never really have. My daughters left and my wife and I divorced; I never really learned to cook." When Santiago and Carolina separated, their four children were teenagers. Carolina went straight to Houston to start a new life in the United States and then sent for

her three daughters; their son stayed behind in Honduras. "When they left Honduras, it was hard for me; really difficult. I missed them and I still miss them. But we still are close," he said.

Santiago continued, "But, like Ceci and them have Tela Café, I have Santiago's Bar." He pointed down the road, "Plus, there's the *mar,* on the other side of the lagoon." Only Laguna de Los Micos and a Garifuna village separate Marión from the Caribbean Sea, located just three miles away. "That is why we used to be a fishing community, because we are so close to the ocean and the lagoon," said Santiago. He then explained that hunting and fishing restrictions recently implemented by the government had destroyed the livelihoods of many of the workers in the village. "Now people don't have jobs, some still fish, but they do it illegally. They don't have any other option," he said. Fishing regulations include a maximum of six hundred meters of net per boat, line and hook fishing in certain parts, and a prohibition of spear guns and dynamite.[46]

According to the Coral Reef Alliance, a patrol program was recently established in Laguna de los Micos in order to protect the waters, as fish populations began to disappear. Fishing regulations had always been in place, but there had been little enforcement of these laws until the alliance converged enabling more patrols.[47] The fishing regulations affected more than just the community of Marión. I had spent the previous day at the Garifuna communities of Barra Vieja and Miami, located directly across the lagoon from Santiago's bar on a thin strip of land separating the lagoon from the Caribbean. My first stop was Miami, a sleepy village with no electricity, huts with thatched roofs, and small restaurants specializing in fresh juices and fried whole fish with plantains. There, I met with Gus, a member of the Barra Vieja village, who took me out

on Laguna de los Micos on his friend's boat. Gus is Garifuna, a group of mixed African and Carib people that arrived on the Bay Islands and northeastern coast of present-day Honduras in the eighteenth century after having been banished from St. Vincent by the British. The Garifuna people settled across the coast of Honduras and created small fishing communities with a vibrant food, dance, and linguistic culture, which became protected under UNESCO's "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage" in 2001.[48]

Wearing a red polo shirt with the blue, yellow and white Chiquita Brands logo, Gus emphasized the importance of spreading knowledge about the dire situation of his community. Speaking in Bay Island Creole, he explained that the survival of their communities was in jeopardy because of fishing regulations that had destroyed the local

Figure 13: Zoomed in map of Tela, Marión, Barra Vieja, and Laguna de los Micos.

economy. Like Santiago, Gus made clear that the fishing economy is the main source of income for these communities, aside from low-level tourism. Gus then proceeded to explain that the fishing regulations were the least of the community's threats. He pointed down the beach at a giant complex of tall buildings and fences, explaining that his community's ongoing struggle was against the encroaching Indura Beach and Golf Resort, a high-end hotel and spa that boasts its occupation of twenty-six miles of Tela Bay. Ironically, the name Indura is taken from the Garifuna language and means "Honduras."[49] Since the 1990s, the Garifuna people in this area have struggled against the Indura Beach and Golf Resort, a development sponsored by the Honduran government and private businesses, with partial funding by the Inter-American Development Bank.[50] These entities justify this neoliberal model by deeming the Garifuna land-use as unproductive, by reinforcing job creation, and by highlighting the potential of increased tourism to the Garifuna communities.[51]

The latest land grab effort against the Garifuna communities occurred in 2014 when local military officials cited eminent domain to violently evict people living in Miami and Barra Vieja from their beachside villages.[52] Gus described the event in detail, explaining how members of the military woke him up and kicked him out in the middle of the night as they destroyed his beachfront hut. Gus said they destroyed the homes of many families to scare the community into leaving so they can expand Indura's massive compound. He said that in some cases these threats have been successful citing the displacement of thousands of Garifuna people and forcing many to migrate to the United States. An estimated 2,000-4,000 Garifuna people live in New Orleans.[53] Due to limited

jobs, many Garifuna that stay behind rely on remittances sent back from family members in the United States.

In other cases, groups like the Land Defense Committee of Triunfo de la Cruz (CODETT), a Garifuna community outside of Tela, have been successful in their resistance efforts against the Indura expansion, despite murders and death threats against community organizers.[54] Immediately after signing a lawsuit against the Tela Municipal Authorities in 1997, three of the leaders were murdered; the cases remain unresolved, but the incident sent a message of intimidation throughout the Garifuna communities.[55] Moreover, recent developments within the Honduran government have made it legal for foreign investors to seize up lands from the Garifuna people and from other groups. After the coup of democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya in 2009, the newly appointed right-wing government turned Honduras into a laboratory for neoliberal reforms, implementing the program called Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDEs). The zones, also called Model Cities or Charter Cities, give eminent domain power to multinationals, which then create autonomous free-trade zones governed by corporations. Each ZEDE is expected to create its own laws, courts, educational programs, taxes, and security.[56]

The idea came from New York University economist, Paul Romer, as a way for foreign investors to get around corrupt institutions in poverty and violence-stricken countries. Romer's initial design intended for the ZEDEs to take over abandoned territory, but when the zones moved into populated (and highly valued) regions across the country, Romer pulled out of his commitment to his own brainchild. Now, in Honduras, a twenty-one-person committee runs the ZEDEs, which include only three Honduran

members. Nine of the board members are former staff in Reagan's administration.[57] This committee undermines the sovereignty of the Honduran people as well as the sovereignty of the state.

The man behind the plan is ex-President Porfirio Lobo Sosa's chief of Staff, Octavio Sanchez, who invoked the success of the United Fruit Company in order to champion the ZEDEs program.[58] Sanchez sees it as the only way to fight corruption—by allowing the foreign investors to set their own laws. Yet the program is clearly undemocratic, unconstitutional, and an antithesis to the needs of the people. Regardless, in 2013, Lobo signed ZEDEs into law in Honduras. When the Honduran Supreme Court declared ZEDEs unconstitutional ruling them as a violation to Honduran sovereignty, Lobo had four out of the five judges sacked, replacing them with more libertarian-minded judges that would back his plan. Current president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, has doubled down on the program, touting it as a job creator. Skeptics argue that the program is selling Honduras to foreigners bit by bit.

But, little has been done to fight against the ZEDEs and most opposition is silenced by powerful and corrupt law enforcement. When human rights lawyer Antonio Trejo drafted a constitutional challenge to the ZEDE policy in 2012, he was murdered while attending a wedding. Trejo made multiple unanswered pleas for a police escort, anticipating the death threats against him. His brother was killed months later. No charges were ever made.[59] The Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras, OFRANEH, calls the ZEDEs a nightmare, condemning the ZEDEs as unconstitutional and racist. OFRANEH has spoken out against the program, particularly the land grabs made in Garifuna protected territory. According to Honduran law, Garifuna lands are considered

communal territory and therefore nontransferable, yet much of the lands have been seized by these ZEDEs.

The ZEDEs of La Ceiba, Puerto Cortes Bajamar, and Cuyamel encircle Tela, yet no official ZEDE is assigned to Tela. The developers of the Indura Beach and Golf Resort, working in tandem with the Honduran military, act as if the Garifuna land of Barra Vieja and Miami were part of the ZEDEs. But, Indura's corporate land grabs predate the ZEDEs, having already paved the way for these foreign interests to take over Honduran land. The military, backed by Indura and the Honduran government, continue its surveillance and attacks on Barra Vieja, but the community keeps fighting back, increasingly gaining support from outside forces. Gus explained that one of the few remaining hopes for his Barra Vieja community is its recognition as a historical site by the Tela Municipality since 1950. Yet, even a UNESCO designation seems to do little to protect these sacred lands from foreign interests. In Honduras, the government is actively selling off the country to foreign entities. The profits stay with the Honduran elite and the foreign investors; the ZEDEs along with other mega-resort projects do little to fix the violence plaguing the country, and only exacerbate the corruption.

Along with displacing the people from these lands, the private-public partnerships have had devastating impacts on the environment in these regions. A report done by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) conducted in 2009, projected the Indura development had caused significant damage to the Laguna de los Micos and other areas of the Jeannette Kawas National Park.[60] This devastation included filling in 87.5 hectares of the lagoon and destroying a significant amount of the wetlands that serve as

ecosystems for diverse flora and fauna as well as natural barriers that protect against flooding.[61] This environmental devastation to Laguna de Los Micos seems like a much likelier culprit for the disappearance of the fish than overfishing, as cited by the Coral Reef Alliance.

Back across the Laguna de los Micos, Santiago said, “I want to show you something.” As we stepped out into the blazing heat, he led me back onto the main street. We passed more houses with nets hanging across staircases and in trees. Banana, mango, and citrus trees lined the dirt streets as he guided me along. Everyone knew Santiago, greeting him as we strolled by. We walked down the street towards the lagoon. The San Alejo River ran parallel to the street about one hundred yards from our path. The river seemed small and innocuous with some children splashing on the shores as a woman washed laundry. As we continued walking, I noticed some stilted houses; most of the homes that I had seen before were just small, wooden shacks on the side of the road. “My bar used to be located down this street, closer to the water,” he said pointing about a block down. “But when the flood happened, we had to move to the spot we are in now. We didn’t have any other option. I still own the space, but it is unsalvageable,” he said.

In November 2013, less than two years before my visit, massive flooding had destroyed the majority of Marión. According to Santiago a landowner had undammed a tributary into the San Alejo River in order to divert the waters from flooding his African palm fields. Rather than flooding the plantation, the waters were redirected to flood the small village. As the water levels began to rise, town officials from Marión filed a police report against the illegal rerouting of these waters. The prosecutor did nothing to protect

the town, allowing the large landowner to proceed.[62] Almost all of the people from the town were evacuated—266 people in total, including Santiago. According to the newspaper, *La Prensa,* the Red Cross began by evacuating 53 people, but as the waters continued to rise the rest of the town realized the necessity to leave.[63] Fortunately, no one was killed, but the floods devastated the village. The San Alejo Company that intentionally flooded Marión makes up part of the Grupo Jaremar, which signed the contract with OPIC to not devastate indigenous lands and with WWF to promote sustainable practices. This example illustrates the limitations of corporations self-regulating within an already deregulated neoliberal system.

Most of the flood damage in Marión occurred closer to the lagoon, approximately six blocks away from Santiago's current location. As we approached his former bar, the extent of the damage became clear. It was almost as if there were two Marións: the older destroyed version and the newer, rebuilt one where Santiago's bar was and where my taxi still waited. In the older version, the floodwaters had brought layers of sediment to the lot filling up the house and patio with sand and soil. It looked as if the house had been halfway swallowed in quicksand with sand reaching the knob on the front door. He pointed to a covered space buried in the backyard, "That is where I had my pool tables." The Barena and Salvavida beer advertisements drooped from the exterior walls with corners of furniture peaking out above the dirt. "It destroyed everything," he said pointing to the river flowing quietly in just yards on the backside of the house.

We continued walking down the road. The destruction grew more evident as we advanced toward the lagoon. Most homes remained in a similar state, if not worse, than Santiago's old bar. Few houses had been rebuilt, this time on stilts, making them

seemingly resilient to future inundations. Further down the road, the trees were more overgrown and an entire block was completely blighted. "This was Ceci's house," said Santiago pointing to an aqua colored cinderblock house with a metal roof, "She lived here before she left. And now it is badly damaged." He said that she had been renting the house out since she had been gone, but when the flood hit, it completely destroyed the home. "No one can live here. She has nothing to come back to," he said despondently. Santiago explained that besides the assistance from the Red Cross to help with evacuations, there was little to no aid from government officials. *La Prensa* reported that the recently elected mayor of Tela, Mario Fuentes, had promised to help build a levee or some sort of barrier to prevent future flooding. According to Santiago that assistance had yet to occur and he doubted if it would ever happen.

Instead, Santiago focused his anger more towards the landowners. He explained that there was even less hope of accountability by the state in prosecuting the wealthy landowner who caused the flood. He was disgusted by the impunity and corruption. "We have no alternative. They control the land and we are just preventing them from making money. They don't care about us and they can pay," he frustratingly exclaimed. If people like Santiago wanted to remain in Marión, then they had to resettle further from the lagoon and the river. The estuary, where the San Alejo River meets the Laguna de Los Micos, went from being a source of prosperity and livelihood into an imminent and volatile force created by the agroindustry and exacerbated by the destruction of wetlands and introduction of sediment by the encroaching mega-tourism in Tela Bay.[64]

Conclusion

Linking the experiences of Santiago in Marión with the experiences of his daughters in New Orleans provides a transnational lens into similar stories of displacement for the sake of privatization and profit. These cases offer a broad picture of the global trends within the transnational political economy that support these mega-projects and show the shortcomings of public-private partnerships. In each of these spaces in Honduras and the United States, mega-projects have contributed to the vulnerability of these communities by destroying local networks and displacing people that reside in those areas. Moreover, in both New Orleans and in the Tela region, officials have used violence prevalent in these communities as a means to justify these mega-project interventions, but do little to acknowledge, let alone fix, the systemic failures that foster this violence. These issues are not solved or even ameliorated; rather they are further marginalized, creating a false sense of security. In New Orleans, leaving existing infrastructures blighted and opting, instead, to demolish homes and businesses somehow becomes an acceptable way to develop (read: displace) New Orleans' neighborhoods. Neighborhood improvement projects can be positive, but when these "improvements" fail to address the needs and acknowledge the realities of existing communities, particularly the realities of the workers that make these communities function.

In the case of Tela, the walls around gated resorts create a countenance of safety and luxury. Tourists in these resorts are shielded from state-violence, instability, corruption that both enable the expansion of these mega-tourism projects *and* sustain the violence of narco-traffickers and gang leaders that plague the region. Tourists are swept in on private buses from San Pedro Sula, or planes that land directly in Tela or La Ceiba.

At the same time, African Palm Oil moguls bask in the safety of their wealth, which enjoys amnesty and protections by the government. In Honduras the imprint of these multinational corporations is not new. These mega-projects like Indura Beach and Golf Resort, the Ensenada Resort in Tela, the ZEDEs, and the massive African palm oil industry build upon the legacies of United Fruit Company and other large fruit conglomerates from the early twentieth century. In this sense, they are literally occupying this neocolonial legacy, establishing their own respective cultural and political hegemonies that displace communities and destroy the environment while thriving on government corruption and completely undercutting democracy and state sovereignty.

The cases of the Ramirez family in Mid-City and their father, Santiago, in Marión, illustrate the impacts and contradictions of this neoliberal framework on their respective businesses and the working class communities in which they operate. These development projects disrupt notions of community, allowing for market-based economies that purport to create jobs and clean up violence (the Tulane and Broad block; Grupo Jaremar's loan from OPIC for palm oil production; the hospital complex in Mid-City; the ZEDEs throughout Honduras). Rather than improve these communities, they marginalize the problems, pushing them elsewhere. They provide solutions, but they are unsustainable solutions, that include temporary, low wage jobs and shortsighted incentives that distribute the risk of failure onto the most precarious people, denying individuals their homes, and creating a cycle of continuous displacement.

As neoliberal structures maintain these systems of oppression that continue to displace the already disenfranchised, collective mobilizations that span race, class, and gender are necessary and must effectively take on global capital at the macro-level. It is

clear that public-private solutions are not the solution. The Obama administration has doubled-down on these efforts further testing the private to see if it can take care of the public, but this has historically proven not to be true. And, it makes sense: developers are profit-driven, looking to feed wealth by cutting costs, creating efficiencies, and maximizing profits. The shortcomings of the public-private partnerships are limitless because the priority of these developers is profit-driven and their own interests—not the interests of the environment, the mom and pop shop, the working class family, and definitely not the working class migrants. Effective change must challenge the coordination between the state and the capital, anticipating and identifying these policy weaknesses. This action must occur on a community and state level, with much more emphasis on community to put pressure on the state, through civil obedience, by crafting sensible legislation, and even by putting forth leaders that will stand for people and not corporate interests.

In some cases communities have been able to find other alternatives and/or organize against these corporate entities. In New Orleans, community-organizing efforts have helped garner attention from City Hall to respond to the developers evicting low-income tenants when incentive packages expired. Local Latinx organizations like Puentes do some work to help with low-income housing for the Latinx population. For the Congress of Day Laborers, one of their continued campaigns and mantras is the called "Right to Remain." But, a dark future lies ahead in urban development. For the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Trump has appointed Ben Carson—a neurosurgeon with no experience in housing—at the helm of the department. This administration sees private development as the solution to the affordable housing

crisis and public mandates as hurdles to private investments.[65] Continued criminalization of communities of color through the prison industrial complex and a beefed up ICE presence, will help to bolster these private interests by further policing these communities and pushing them out (into prisons, immigration detention centers, and to the margins of cities that are underserved and crime-ridden i.e. New Orleans East). The future of equitable urban development is bleak, but not defeated. Community organizations must further mobilize their constituents to take on and/or collaborate with local governments and fight for equitable policies, like community land trusts, that protect for the rights of the already disenfranchised.[66] These efforts must ensure that the rights of the people are prioritized over the profits of the private sector.

In Honduras, similar deregulated systems like the ZEDEs and private industries are a direct threat to the democracy of all Honduras. Some efforts have helped to challenge this unfettered growth and offer sanctuary for displaced people. Groups like, the United People of the Agúan (MUCA), have successfully organized small agricultural cooperatives to protect workers from the expansion of the giant African palm oil industry.[67] On the coast, the Garifuna community in Triunfo de la Cruz has become a safe haven for displaced Garifuna people. In the Agúan Valley, which is about one hundred miles southeast of Santiago's community of Marión, community-organizing efforts, led by Berta Cáceres, have been successful in blocking multinational entities from the construction of mega-projects. In 2015, Cáceres received the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her work to prevent the construction of the Agua Zarca Dam, a joint project between the Honduran company, Desarrollos Energeticos, SA (DESA) and the Chinese-owned, Sinohydro.[68]

Yet, leaders of these resistance movements have increasingly been targets of violence by hired security. More than one hundred activists have been murdered in Honduras since the 2009 coup of Zelaya.[69] This hired security is oftentimes state-sponsored enforcement that protects private interests rather than protecting the people most affected. On March 3, 2016, Cáceres was brutally killed in retaliation to her organizing work. A former Honduran military soldier confirmed what everyone, including Cáceres, knew to be true: the DESA and Honduran government were responsible for her death. The soldier claimed that he saw Cáceres' name along with the names of other notable activists on a hit list distributed to U.S.-trained special force units in Honduras. The sergeant's revelations illustrate the multi-levels of corruption, power, and link the continued legacy of U.S. imperialism directly to her death.[70] The future of community-led development in Honduras is grim, not because of apathy, but because of fear of death by government-backed security forces. The global community must take a much stronger stance against this impunity and hold these corporations and the governments (including the United States) accountable. Moreover, researchers and community organizers must show the transnational impacts that lead to the continuous displacement of people to better grasp reasons why people migrate. These shouldn't be fringe or radical issues; rather, ZEDEs and corporate imperialism should be exposed, serving as a harbinger for the United States and other promoters of national neoliberalism to show the degree of devastations—globally and locally—generated by unlimited private enterprise.[71]

Chapter Five

Latinx Service Industry Workers: Cultivating Place in the Formal Economy

In April 2016, I met Carola and her six-year-old daughter at their apartment building in Gretna, Louisiana, just across the Mississippi River from New Orleans. They needed a ride to the Congress of Day Laborer weekly meeting. ICE had recently detained Carola's husband at his regular check-in appointment at their office, even though he complied with ICE's demands and was not a priority for removal. He faced imminent deportation, which would separate him from Carola and their two young daughters. Like her husband, Carola is undocumented, but their two young children are U.S. citizens. During the twenty-minute car ride to the meeting, Carola was stoic as she detailed what happened to her husband. Her daughter quietly drew pictures in her notebook in the backseat of my car. I watched from my rearview mirror as she looked up curiously at her mother, trying to grasp why her father disappeared. For the next five weeks, I drove Carola each Wednesday to the meetings. Over those trips back and forth across the river, she told me about her own experience.

Carola has worked for the past eight years in the French Quarter as a bathroom attendant in two popular Bourbon Street bars. Both bars are classic stops for tourists groups and bachelorette parties. She is originally from El Salvador, where she worked in a sweatshop making clothes for a multinational corporation based out of China. She said

that in San Salvador, the capital city, she worked long hours with no breaks, to the point that she suffered from severe kidney problems from not being allowed to use the bathroom. She explained that because of the poor working conditions, lack of opportunity, and increased violence in the city—San Salvador recently surpassed San Pedro Sula, Honduras as the most violent city in the world—she and her husband decided to migrate to the United States to live with family in New Orleans.[1] Upon arriving to the city, she joined her sister-in-law working as bathroom attendants in the popular Bourbon Street bars. Since 2008, the two women have worked together, sometimes switching night shifts, in order to help each other take care of their young children.

On an average day, Carola gets to work at 7:30 p.m. and, depending on the night, leaves around 5 a.m., just in time to get her five-year-old daughter ready for school. Carola and her sister-in-law are part of a crew of female workers contracted by an agency to maintain the bathrooms of these touristy bars during their peak hours. Each night, Carola is stationed in the women's restroom tasked with keeping the space clean and the customers happy. She sits in the corner of the restroom as customers enter and exit, offering patrons toiletries like deodorant, perfumes, tampons, and lotions. As needed, she cleans the individual stalls after each use. Carola is paid only in tips, receiving no minimum wage to ensure a base income. She must pay her boss, a Mexican woman, around twenty percent of her income each week. Her pay is never consistent and relies on people having cash, which is not always the case. Carola explained, "many people want to tip, but they don't have cash." In one example she gave, a woman had only a credit card, so she tipped her with three Red Bulls purchased from the bar. Carola appreciated the gift, which she estimated at costing around twelve dollars, but she said she would

have preferred the cash. That night, she drank one of the Red Bulls to help keep her awake during the late shift; she took the other two energy drinks home. Carola said that many times women offer to buy her alcoholic drinks when they don't have cash, but she explained that she doesn't really drink alcohol and if she did, it would likely just make her fall asleep on the job.

Carola said that people tip just half of the time and it is usually around one or two dollars. "During busy seasons like Mardi Gras drunk ladies will tip big," she explained, "like twenty dollars." She asserted that most of the time "the mess and craziness is not worth the low pay." Carola says that she always looks for other jobs, but nothing allows her the flexibility to be at home with her two daughters during the day. Carola is in a vulnerable position in that she needs a job, but her hours are long and the pay is minimal. To risk calling out her employer for labor violations, would mean losing her job, which was the only source of income while her husband was detained for four months. With the help of the Congress of Day Laborers, Carola's husband was released in July 2016 from the detention center after the long, but victorious battle with ICE officials. Despite the release of her husband, Carola's story remains tragic, as her family continues to be in a precarious situation because of their documentation status. Plus, Carola remains tied to her bathroom attendant job, despite the illegality of the contract. Many stories exist like Carola's; these forms of employment thrive within the deregulated service industry sector that dominates New Orleans' economy.

Many of these service industry workers—white and people of color—fall through the gaping cracks of this deregulated sector and few resources exist that adequately address the needs of these workers. In theorizing the neoliberal impacts on the economy,

Miguel Angel Centeno and Alejandro Portes posit, "newly privatized firms not only shed employment, but also in the absence of strong unions and government regulators, make free use of temporary and off-the-books workers or subcontract production and sales…the end result is the decline of formal protected work."[2] Many of the undocumented service industry workers exist off record, in the shadows, and lost within layers of these subcontracts. Moreover, the contexts of their lives—dealing with immigration status, family obligations abroad and in the United States, and their own private social lives—further impact their relationship with work and the workplace. In this sense, I argue that these workers fall on the edges of the formal economy, steadily employed yet consistently vulnerable, illustrating the blurred lines between the formal and informal economy.

For many Latinx undocumented workers, the flexibility and deregulation of the service industry is precisely what attracts them to those jobs, representing one of the central paradoxes within this neoliberal dynamic. In regards to immigration, even though deregulation means that documentation status rarely impacts hiring practices, it also means that hours worked and wages earned go under-regulated as well. Undocumented people are able to get a job, but they oftentimes are victims of wage theft and, like many service industry workers, must keep two jobs in order to make ends meet. These jobs offer limited upward mobility for the worker, keeping them at one skill level with the same wage and rare chances at promotion. Yet, in contrast, these jobs offer undocumented individuals formal employment through legible businesses, especially compared to tamale vendors that operate on the streets in the informal economy. And, unlike the *lonchera* owner or restaurateurs, these service industry jobs require no

overhead from the worker—as the employee, they have less of a commitment to consider logistics, management, and finances. Moreover, restaurant industry jobs provide elements of mobility, where workers are not completely tied to their employers and can quit or change jobs as needed.

Moreover, employment within the service industry, like in Carola's experience, enables workers, particularly women, to have more flexible schedules to be able to take care of children. But this aspect shows how service industry work is oftentimes gendered as female, thus, economically and culturally undervalued.[3] The average weekly median for women servers is $387 and for male servers, $423.[4] Saru Jayaraman points out that, "Although the majority of restaurant workers in the United States are women, the majority of the managers, chefs, and owners are men.[5] In this way, after working long hours in the service industry, not only are women paid less, but then also are expected to work extended hours in their own homes—cleaning, cooking and taking care of children.[6] Undocumented women and women of color are at the greatest disadvantage, because they are relegated to the lowest positions (particularly in fast food) and they fall disproportionately into the category of non-tipped workers.[7] Women bear most of the brunt in an already overstrained and deregulated service industry economy.

A report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics states that foreign-born workers were more likely than native-born workers to be employed in service occupations, with Latinx workers making up almost half (48.8%) of this labor force. This report also confirms that foreign-born workers "tend to earn less per week than native-born workers."[8] Latinx workers play a major role in this growing food industry economy

working in both the front and back of the house as sous chefs, head cooks, bartenders, servers, and as dishwashers. In their 2010 report on the restaurant industry in New Orleans, Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC) states that "While there are a few 'good' restaurant jobs in the restaurant industry, and opportunities to earn a living wage, the majority are 'bad jobs,' characterized by very low wages, few benefits, and limited opportunities for upward mobility or increased income.[9] The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the average hourly wage for these food service workers is $9.87 with an annual wage average at $20,502.[10] Only 15.5% of the 530 workers interviewed by ROC were offered health benefits.[11] In New Orleans it is estimated that 78% of restaurant workers are subject to wage theft from lost or misallocated tips meant to supplement the already low $2.13 minimum wage.[12] Federal law requires that employers must make up the difference between the minimum wage of $7.25 and the $2.13 tipped wage, but this practice is rarely observed.[13]

ROC reports that in New Orleans the majority of immigrant restaurant workers bear the brunt of the poor labor conditions even though they work in both the front and back of the house. In some cases this discrepancy is due to language barriers that prevent workers from communicating with customers (taking orders, explaining menu items). In other cases, it is discriminatory, in that it is assumed that these workers are not aware of their rights and are therefore taken advantage of.[14] According to ROC, New Orleans employers attributed the increase of undocumented workers to their willingness "to work for lower wages and under worse conditions," a dangerous perception that can lead to justifying lower wages.[15] ROC found that Latinx workers almost split time between front of the house (55.6%) and back of the house (44.4%), yet were still paid significantly less

than white workers.[16] According to ROC, 58.6% of "immigrant workers" experienced overtime pay violations and 44.6% reported "doing something that put their own safety at risk," doubling that of U.S. born workers.[17] As the postdiluvial population of New Orleans remains around 80% of the pre-Katrina levels, the Latinx population has more than doubled (8.9% in the New Orleans metro area), thus filling many of these restaurant industry jobs.[18] This treatment bespeaks the disposability and vulnerability of this undocumented labor force.

In most cases, the options are bleak and few spaces recognize the local service industry unions. Many grassroots organizations are supporting the "Fight for 15" campaign, led by fast food workers, which seeks to raise the minimum wage, ensure secure paid personal time, and obtain the right to unionize. Some cities and states have already partially achieved these goals, enabling workers to pay for healthcare, which allows them to work just one job (and therefore spend more time with family). Louisiana, along with five other states, have no minimum wage laws, which means that employers must pay the federal minimum wage or adhere to local ordinances. New Orleans city council passed a living wage ordinance in 2015, but this policy only applies to city workers and contracted employees.

Labor unions like UNITE HERE and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) are increasingly gaining grounds, combatting the anti-union ethos that took effect in early 1980s but become full blown in New Orleans after Katrina. The decline of the Avondale Shipyard just across the Mississippi River and once one of Louisiana's largest employers, is just one example of the repercussions of this anti-union hostility in New Orleans.[19] In 2015, UNITE HERE Local 2262 gained another major victory in the city

winning union recognition and first contract for hotel and food service employees at Harrah's Casino. With that victory, UNITE HERE counts 1,350 members including members that recently unionized a Loews Hotel in the early 2000s.[20] ROC-Nola, the local restaurant organization established in 2008, has had some successful wages campaigns and workers' rights trainings. Most significantly, the ROC has fought head-to-head battles against the lobbying group, National Restaurant Association (NRA), to improve wages and paid personal days for workers. The NRA philosophy embodies the tension of freewheeling enterprises along with liberal hiring policies, as they adamantly opposed the 2010 Healthy Families Act (seven paid sick days per year for businesses with over fifteen employees) and Wages Act (raising tipped wages to $5.50), yet supporting causes like immigration reform that favors undocumented workers.[21]

While it is clear that these restaurant industry jobs do not provide a strong economic path with sufficient wages, benefits, and security for workers, it is important to note that in some cases, the context of the restaurant industry job *does* provide a sense of belonging and of stability for these individuals. In this sense, it is within a space, not the job itself, that undocumented individuals are able to find a sense of permanence and, at times, community while earning a meager income. Using the two case studies of Paula and José, I will demonstrate the importance of these restaurants as welcoming and, at times, vital spaces for the undocumented community, helping to foster their integration into the city. For Paula, her work in the back of the house as a dishwasher at Tagine enables her to find extra economic opportunities, develop language skills, create a "familial" atmosphere, and gives her legitimacy in the eyes of both the Orleans Juvenile Court and Federal Immigration Court. For José, his work bouncing between The

Mediterranean Bakery, Claudia's Cocina, and Serrano's Tacos as a front of the house, made-to-order cook helped him to develop a sense of community as an openly gay, undocumented man. Along with having to work long hours and double shifts, the respective journeys that these individuals endure helps shed light on the complexity of this undocumented population and illustrates their struggles and successes in gaining legitimacy within the political economy of New Orleans.

Paula, Dishwashing, and Job Stability

Paula arrived in New Orleans from Honduras in 2013, joining her older brother and sister who had been living in the city since 2006. While Paula is not considered an unaccompanied minor, because she was twenty-five years old when she arrived, she was a part of the mass exodus of Central Americans coming to the United States to escape extreme violence and abject poverty. [22] When Paula first arrived in New Orleans, her established networks led her to a job working as a dishwasher in Tagine, a Mediterranean restaurant located in the Uptown area. Paula makes up part of a small crew that keep the uptown restaurant running. As immigrants in the United States, the husband and wife duo, Pierre and Simone, both originally from North Africa, capitalized on their legal immigration status. They used Pierre's experience managing restaurants and Simone's expertise in the kitchen to create a lasting landmark in the uptown neighborhood.

Located on a quaint but highly commercialized street, the restaurant fits within a landscape full of boutiques and lined with over twenty bars and dining establishments, all within a half-mile radius. Mediterranean artwork, booths, and brightly colored ceramics temper the elegance conveyed through the white tablecloths, silver kettles, and Francophone menu. The restaurant features North African foods, offering dishes like

tajines, *merguez*, and a variety of couscous-based dishes. Pierre and Simone have also adopted local ingredients, serving local gulf fish and dishes like crawfish bisque. Paula works the evening shift at Tagine, from 5PM until around 11PM, depending on how busy the restaurant is on a given night. She works every evening except for Mondays, her day off. When I asked about her pay, Paula explained that she gets paid $9.50 per hour, but does not get included in the tip share. She said that she is satisfied with her pay and that it is a "good wage" and helps her to pay her rent and bills. She usually makes between $300-$400 per week, working about 30-40 hours. Her yearly average is somewhere between $15,000-$17,000, depending on many hours per week she is able to work in the restaurant, which is contingent upon how busy it is during the season. Paula is the only dishwasher at the restaurant, which employs just six people

Emphasizing the term "family" Paula made it seem as if the space was a welcoming and positive place to work. For example, she said that Friday nights they all get together when the shift is over and they eat dinner together. She said, "the sons of the owners come, and we eat all as a family at around ten or eleven at night." She explained that the rest of the week because she works the evening hours, the traditional family meal doesn't occur until the shift is over. And, that is usually late. She explained, "I don't really eat it because when we can eat is after the shift and it is very late and hurts my stomach." The tradition of the family meal has increasingly become an important part of the service industry culture, in which the front-of-the-house workers and the back-of-the-house workers come together to share a larger, communal, yet resourceful meal prepared by the chef. The *Wall-Street Journal* reports that the tradition of the family meal, "is taking on greater importance as restaurateurs and chefs increasingly see it as a way of

setting the tone for service that day and keeping morale high among employees."[23] But, the late night family meals at Tagine seem to counter this philosophy; Paula's hesitation to partake illustrates the drawbacks of a seemingly generous gesture. Working long shifts, with limited breaks during prime dinner hours, makes the family meal seem more like an afterthought than a perk.

Paula was generally positive about her experience working for Pierre and Simone, "they are really good people," she said. She did not go into too much detail about her employers, but highlighted the familial atmosphere of the space and the kindness and patience of Pierre and Simone. She attributed Pierre and Simone's openness to their own experiences as migrants in New Orleans. She explained that their cultural and social differences likely helped give them some perspective on and empathy towards Paula's experience as a newcomer in the city. Paula explained that when she first arrived to New Orleans in the fall of 2013, friends of her sister, Aurora, helped her to find the job. She said, "I was really lucky. I got the job immediately, which isn't always the case for people living here." Having these existing connections through social capital helps to link new migrants with jobs. It provides a much easier process for people to integrate and familiarize with the social, cultural, and political implications of a space.

Paula's sister, Aurora, and brother, Martin, both arrived in New Orleans after Katrina. Aurora began working in construction—demolition of buildings and clean up crews. She has since established her own housekeeping business in which she cleans in both residential and commercial settings. Aurora has been successful in creating her own communities in New Orleans, through her leadership as a member of the Congress of Day Laborers, her participation at the First Grace United Methodist Church, and her

involvement as a parent in her children's school. These community affiliations also lead to work for Aurora and Paula.

When I asked about her schedule, Paula said, "I work in housekeeping for three or four days per week. I clean houses, but I work alone mostly. Some days I help my sister, Aurora. I help her clean one house. Monday and Wednesday are my cleaning days." Paula keeps a busy schedule working evenings at Tagine and cleaning houses during the day. She said that Aurora helped her get an initial start in the housecleaning business, and Pierre helped her find other families. Paula and Aurora first worked together on larger projects, but now mostly have their own individual clients. She said that her pay each week varies, depending on how many houses she cleans. But she said that it is enough to subsidize the money she makes at Tagine in order to pay the rent, bills, and remittances to send back to her mother and two year old son that live in Catacamas, Honduras. I was first introduced to Paula in Honduras back in July 2013 when I conducted my initial fieldwork in that region. Aurora had invited me to visit her family in Honduras, connecting me with her Paula and their mother. Paula would leave for the United States in the fall of 2013, just three months after my visit.

Catacamas sits in the eastern half of Honduras at the base of the Cerro de la Cruz Mountains and has a population of 44,000 in the urban area.[24] It is university town with strong agricultural production and is located in the department of Olancho, about a three-hour bus ride from the capital, Tegucigalpa. Catacamas hosts the Universidad Nacional de Agricultura, the largest agricultural university in the country.[25] Paula's family lives on the outskirts of Catacamas, renting a small cinderblock house toward the end of a long

dirt road in the impoverished neighborhood, Barrio Las Lomas. Catacamas is described as a "rough-and-ready farm town where some men openly carry pistols and machete mayhem is not uncommon."[26] Just six miles away, Paula's road leads to the archaeological site, Talgua Caves, a pre-Columbian ossuary that dates back to 900 B.C. and is often attributed to either the Lenca or Pech people.[27] Catacamas is the last stop before arriving to La Mosquitia region, the largest wilderness area in Central America, consisting of seemingly impenetrable tropical rain forests and mangroves. Drug traffickers often use the remoteness of La Mosquitia to their benefit, smuggling drugs through the region with makeshift landing strips. According to the U.S. State Department, 79% of all "cocaine smuggling flights from South America pass through Honduras with the La Mosquitia region singled out" as a primary landing zone for smugglers.[28] Catacamas serves as one of the main stopping points before entering the dense, unruly terrain.[29]

As I got off at the bus station on my first visit to Catacamas in 2013, I recognized Paula immediately—she looked just like Aurora. She greeted me with a hug and the customary sides kiss, helping me with my bags as we took a cab directly to their house. When Aurora, the oldest of her seven siblings, left Catacamas, Honduras in 2006, she left behind her one year old son, Josue. Paula stayed behind to raise Josue and help support their family. From 2006 to 2013, Aurora and her brother Martin were the main sources of income for their family sending them monthly remittances. At the time that Aurora left, Paula was finishing high school and, like Aurora, completed a career track in accounting. Upon graduation, she worked as a cashier in a local grocery store where she received steady pay, but worked long hours. She said, "As the economy worsened, the owner of

the store where I worked had to let go of a bunch of people. And for us that he kept on, he cut our salary and it wasn't enough." Her only child was born in 2012 and she said that by that time, "my son was really young and I had to buy his milk and diapers and medicine, and in Honduras there isn't insurance at all so a person has to pay for it on their own." She quit her job later that year to stay at home with her son. The long hours and low pay at the store was not worth it. Her family was forced to rely solely on the remittances sent to Honduras by Aurora and Martin.

On the way to the house, Paula gave me some background on the neighborhood, calling it "*humilde"* or humble. The taxi went down a dusty path with houses spaced out approximately one hundred feet between each other on a desolate road passing an occasional citrus tree. Paula's house situated on top of a small dirt hill with a metal chain link fence lining the front and a small entryway leading up to the house. Aurora's young son greeted us at the front and with his raspy voice and giant hazel eyes introduced himself, "Soy Josue." His similarities to Aurora's children in the United States were uncanny. Once we arrived to the front porch house, Paula and Aurora's mother, Aurora Sr., their sister Beti, and Paula's six-month-old baby greeted me. Aurora's mother was extremely kind and gave me a large hug as she welcomed me into their home.

I entered the small brick house, which had four rooms, concrete floors, and a small bathroom attached to the back of the house. Aurora Sr. explained that her three youngest kids, two sons and a daughter, would be home later because they attended public school in the evening. She said that Josue goes to a private school, paid by Aurora, during the day. Josue goes to school each day in a taxi, also paid by Aurora, because the school he attends is located in the central part of town and it is dangerous for him to walk

that far alone. Aurora had sent me with gifts to hand out to her family—she hadn't seen them at that point for seven years, but was able to send money via Western Union. Spiderman apparel, jeans, sandals, coloring books, fingernail polish were all part of the items included for Josue and the family. Josue had just celebrated his birthday the weekend before, so these gifts were an extension of his birthday. She had some cash for her mother and some drawings that her children had colored for their big brother and the family. The family cherished each item.

For the rest of that evening, I threw a New Orleans Saints football with Josue in the front yard. The family sat on the porch and we made small talk about life in Catacamas and about how Aurora is doing in New Orleans. The high school-age kids, Arón, Samuel, and Serena, arrived home later that night dressed in their school uniform—light blue button up oxford and navy blue pants for the boys and navy skirt for Serena. Like any typical youth, they were less interested in the strange white person on their porch, and more eager to get into their room—the only air-conditioned room in the house—to watch their favorite television shows. At the time of my first visit, I had no idea that Paula and her two younger brothers had plans to migrate to the United States. While she discussed in depth the difficulties of the neighborhood and the challenges of finding a job in the region, she never mentioned any notion of leaving for the United States. Each night Paula, her infant, and I shared a small room located off the main living space. We slept in two beds situated diagonally from each other across the small room lined with boxes of used clothing, baby toys, a diaper stand, and old furniture.

While I was in Catacamas we did not venture far from the house. We walked about two blocks to the house of another daughter, Mari, her husband, and two sons. At

that time they owned a small store that sold sodas, candy, car oil, and basic general store items like flour, eggs, onions, potatoes, etc. We spent an afternoon there, but that was the farthest we explored in the neighborhood. I spent the days talking to Josue about his favorite subjects in school (math) and his favorite soccer team. Paula and I discussed daily life in Catacamas and some intimate details of the family dynamics. Aurora Sr. explained to me her health concerns due to being overweight. I told them about all the activism of Aurora in New Orleans, specifically her role as a leader with the Congress of Day Laborers. As I spoke, I let Josue play games on my laptop, but I watched as he looked up from the computer when I mentioned his siblings.

I returned to New Orleans about a month after visiting Paula and her family in Catacamas. In early October I attended a Congress of Day Laborer night meeting. As I sat at the sign-in table in the front, I saw Aurora and Paula enter the building. I was baffled! I immediately got up to greet Paula. She said that she had made the decision a week after I had left to leave Catacamas. She said the hardest part was leaving her baby, Osiel, behind, but she said the situation was so dire in Honduras that she had to leave in order to better provide for her family. Paula embarked on the journey alone heading from Honduras, through Guatemala, then boarding the infamous train, *La Bestia,* in Mexico. When I interviewed Paula, we didn't get into too many details of the journey, but she did say that "despite the dangers, the injuries, and the emotional adventure" *La Bestia* was a "fun" experience to see all the people passing by on these journeys and the thrill of riding on top of the train. "But I wouldn't wish it upon any of my loved ones. It was just an exciting thing for me to do," she quickly clarified. *La Bestia* is one of the primary options for Central Americans without Visas to travel across Mexico, from the Guatemalan

border to the U.S. border. Migrants climb on the tops of the trains, risking amputations and even death, as they go at high speeds with nothing to hold on to.[30]

It took Paula sixteen days to reach the border at Reynosa, Mexico. She and her crew had a limited window to cross into McAllen, Texas through the Rio Grande, which is guarded heavily by Border Patrol agents. Paula said that as soon as they reached the banks of the Rio Grande, crossing into the United States, Border Patrol agents picked them up. "We had no chance," she said with her arms up in the air. After several hours of processing, they were sent to South Texas Detention Center in San Antonio. From there, Paula had her first immigration meeting in San Antonio, but was released on her own recognizance, using Aurora as her point of contact for her release. Upon arriving in New Orleans (Aurora picked her up in San Antonio), Paula began working with Aurora to clean houses and quickly acclimated to New Orleans lifestyle. Soon after arriving, she found her job with Tagine and started creating her own niche within the city. Like Aurora, she attended First Grace Methodist Church and went to Congress of Day Laborer meetings all while living with Aurora's family.

Paula in New Orleans

About four months after Paula arrived to New Orleans, her two younger brothers, Samuel and Arón, set off on the same journey eventually arriving into the United States in February 2014, joining the 52,000 unaccompanied minors that fled poverty and extreme violence to cross into the United States from Central America that year—a 1,200% increase compared to 2011.[31] After the coup'd'etat of democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya, in 2009, a destabilized Honduras saw a significant increase in crime. In 2014, Honduras was considered the most violent country in the world

(excluding war torn countries), with an average of 80 murders per 100,000 people from 2011 to 2014.[32] Narco-traffickers controlled the region, paying off corrupt law enforcement. Gang-related violence skyrocketed. Gang members approached Samuel and Arón multiple times, trying to get them to join. They had no option but to leave. When I asked why they left, Paula explained to me that the situation in Honduras, particularly in Catacamas, had become increasingly violent, especially for young males. She said, "In the neighborhood, almost every day, there was a lot of delinquency. The youth are forced to join gangs and the gangs recruit the youth." I found out later that Samuel and Arón had witnessed one of his classmates murdered down the street from their house when they were walking home from school. Paula explained that the Mara Salvatrucha were one of several gangs making their way into the region from the larger cities. She said, "More gangs like the Mara are coming from San Pedro Sula to Olancho because they are coming one by one to recruit more people." Samuel and Arón chose to leave rather than to face the pressures of joining a gang, and the consequence of refusing to join.

On the day they left Honduras, Samuel was fifteen and Arón was seventeen years old. The boys made their way northward, following the same trail as Paula. In early February 2014, Samuel and Arón climbed atop *La Bestia* at the Mexico/Guatemala border, passing through Mexico at exhilarating speeds, leaving all things familiar behind. Like Paula, the boys arrived near Reynosa, Mexico at the Rio Grande across from McAllen, Texas. And like Paula, Border Patrol immediately picked them up as soon as they reached the shores on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. Together, the boys entered ICE's processing room to have the information collected and fingerprints permanently entered into the biometric system. The day they were picked up, February 22, 2014, Arón

turned eighteen, legally making him an adult. Because of his age, he was split up from Samuel, who was sent to the detention camp for children and families. Arón was sent through an expedited process and promptly deported back to Honduras. Less than one month later, on March 17, 2014, Samuel was released from the detention center into the custody of his sisters. Paula and Aurora met him in San Antonio, making the ten-hour journey down I-10 from Texas to Louisiana to pick him up, the same trip Aurora made six months before to get Paula.

Meanwhile, Arón began his almost two yearlong liminal state bouncing between Honduras and Mexico, where he worked odd jobs and stayed in different centers dedicated to migrants and refugees. This time period proved stressful for Arón and his family in both the United States and Honduras. Paula explains that they had to collect thousands of dollars to pay for a coyote to help get him back across the border, along with money to help him while living in Mexico. But their efforts were not in vain. Paula explained, "My brother would rather be caught between the borders in Mexico than have to join a gang. Not everyone wants to be a delinquent, a criminal or a murderer. Sometimes one would rather die than have to kill another person or become a criminal. Living in Honduras is really hard, and each day it is getting harder and harder." Arón had no option to return to Catacamas. He had fled the gang recruitment and would be a target if he returned. At the same time he faced a major risk of being caught in Mexico. In 2014, President Obama and Mexican President Peña Nieto developed a militarized strategy setting up checkpoints to intercept Central American refugees in Mexico and deport them back to their county of origin. To many, like Arón, this policy is a death sentence. The Obama administration invested $86 million in this strategy that State Department

officials herald as a success because it discourages migration. But, in reality, the policy is shortsighted, failing to grasp that these individuals are refugees fleeing death sentences in their hometowns. They have no other option.[33]

This death sentence is precisely the circumstance that Arón faced upon returning to Honduras and thus his motivation for hiding out in Mexico until he could find a viable entry into the United States. For Samuel, these were the circumstances that he used for his own defense in court as he applied for the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). The Immigration Act of 1990 added SIJS amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which allocates a percentage of special immigrant Visas to "help foreign children in the United States who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected." The status allows children to live and work permanently in the United States and eventually apply for citizenship. Beneficiaries of SIJS cannot petition green cards for their parents, but once they have citizenship they may petition green cards for their siblings.[34]

At this point, Paula and Samuel had moved out of Aurora's home into a small house in the Lower Garden District, in a safe and quiet area near Tagine. During this time, Samuel began school at International High School (IHS) of New Orleans, a charter school located in the Central Business District. Samuel, a quiet and respectful kid, with short, curly hair usually hidden beneath a flat-brimmed hat, excelled in his classes at IHS, despite entering with no English. He was motivated to study, picking up English quickly and was placed in the advanced International Baccalaureate classes, a feat difficult even for native-English speakers. Samuel not only excelled in the classroom, but also on the soccer field playing for IHS's competitive team. By December 2014, with the help of the Congress of Day Laborers, Aurora and Paula found a pro bono lawyer to take Samuel's

case to apply for SIJS. I was asked to act as an expert witness on behalf of Samuel, testifying on the dangerous conditions in his neighborhood in Catacamas.

For Samuel to qualify, his mother, Aurora Sr., had to officially "abandon" him, giving up full custody. They also had to track down their estranged father in order to get him to declare his "neglect' and inability to care for his youngest son. Each parent had to present a notarized document declaring that they pass custody on to Paula. My role was to verify the limited ability for Aurora Sr. to take care of young son, considering the dearth of employment in their town, the poverty-stricken neighborhood, and the threat of violence that plagued the area. I felt equipped to testify on behalf of Samuel and Paula. Moreover, the night before the case, Aurora and Paula had found out their uncle had been killed just outside Tegucigalpa. The motive for the killing was gang related; the tragedy bolstered Samuel's case. In January 2015, almost a year after Samuel and Arón had reached the United States border, I sat with Samuel and Paula in Juvenile Court, as he vied for his legalization.

In the courtroom, I testified first about the dangers of the neighborhood and the threat of Mara Salvatrucha and gang recruitment. I explained the gunshots I had heard each night that I stayed at their house in Barrio Las Lomas in Catacamas. The juvenile court judge asked, "What makes New Orleans, a city plagued with violence and its own levels of corruption, safer than Catacamas?" The question gave me brief pause, but I was able to respond, with confidence. I explained how there are threats of violence in New Orleans, but these threats are at much higher levels in Honduras, using statistics that ranked New Orleans as the thirty-second most violent city and had San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa ranking second and sixth in the world.[35] I explained the impunity in

Honduras, a country in which 96% of crimes go unsolved because of a corrupt and destabilized system.[36] I explained how there is no 911 and no neighborhood accountability, doubting myself at times when referencing the NOPD as a reliable and accountable resource. I focused mostly on Samuel's opportunities in New Orleans—attending International High School, playing soccer, and the stability of Paula's income and housing. I explained the situation in Catacamas where there was just one small meal served each day—rice and beans. I detailed the tight quarters in which the family lived in Las Lomas—eight people in a four-room house. And, I tried to reinforce the general sense of lawlessness in Catacamas.

The judge heard my testimony, but more importantly, listened as Samuel told of his own hardships, giving firsthand accounts in his soft-spoken, solemn tone. He recounted a story about being harassed and assaulted by gang members, specifically the Mara Salvatrucha. He described in detail how he witnessed the brutal murder of his friend as he walked home from school. After Samuel gave his testimony, the judge called Paula to the witness stand. Paula's purpose was to declare her ability to provide a steady and safe environment for Samuel. Paula described in detail her living situation—a small space with a kitchen, two bedrooms, and a common area to watch TV and eat meals. Most importantly, it was located in a safe block in the Lower Garden District, conveniently between Samuel's school and Paula's place of employment, Tagine. Paula brought in a signed letter from Tagine proving that she had stable employment, working for a year and a half at Tagine. Her job in the formal economy with official documents proving her stability helped convince the judge that she could provide for her brother. After brief deliberation, the judge sided with Paula, granting her full custody rights and

the referral for Samuel for the SIJS. This formal job in a high-end restaurant legitimized Paula's experience in the eyes of the state. With just a few more steps, Samuel received SIJS green card status.

But even though Paula officially became Samuel's legal guardian, she still remained in a precarious state with her own impending immigration case. And Arón still remained trapped in Mexico. On June 30, 2015, Paula had an important court date with ICE to determine whether or not she would face an imminent deportation date or if the federal judge would close her case. Paula did not have an attorney for the case, but she had followed all the necessary procedures. She asked me to go with her, so I met with her at her house in the Lower Garden District. As we drove together to the ICE office, she was calm, carrying on regular conversation. She almost seemed more preoccupied with the prospect that the court would delay causing her to be late for work at Tagine later that evening. She said that Pierre and Simone knew she had an important court case and they'd likely be flexible if she had to be late. We met Aurora and her kids outside Federal Immigration Court, located in Canal Place, the high-end shopping mall located on Canal Street at the east end of the French Quarter. We passed by the storefront of the Saks Fifth Avenue in order to take the elevator to the twenty-fourth floor. Paula remained calm as we talked about her son and my upcoming trip to Honduras, where I would visit her family again in Catacamas. Once we arrived, we checked in the small waiting room filled with people awaiting their own immigration cases.

We sat together in a corner of the room. Aurora's kids watched animated You Tube videos on their mothers' phone. Aurora, Paula and I passed the time talking about the conditions in Honduras and they told me about the latest gossip and travel warnings

in Honduras. “You can’t wear red. Or yellow,” explained Aurora. “Yeah,” confirmed Paula, “and you can’t wear leggings and you can’t dye your hair blonde.” I asked why such random things. They said that there is a gang leader in San Pedro Sula and those are colors and the items he likes for his *mujer* (woman) to wear. According to their sources, this gang leader sent out the message to all his gang members to target any woman wearing these items. “They are reserved just for him,” Aurora said, half laughing. At this point, Aurora’s children began paying attention. They weren’t afraid to ask all the questions reeling in my head. “Why those colors?” “What if your hair is already blond?” “How many people have they attacked?” Paula and Aurora did not really have answers for any of these questions and they even seemed dubious about the veracity of these rumors. I took note, considering I was leaving the next week for Honduras.

We continued with similar conversations until the guard called Paula’s name—it was her turn. In the past, I had gone into court in support of members of the Congress of Day Laborers, but this time the guard didn’t allow me to enter because I was not an attorney. He said that they court was too full to have superfluous people enter the space. I sat with Aurora and the kids, waiting for Paula to return. The federal court is required to provide an interpreter, so I wasn’t too concerned about the language barrier in the courtroom. Rather, both Aurora and I wanted me to provide solidarity for Paula in her case—to simply be there for her during a difficult time. During the wait, Aurora and I talked about Josue and I asked her if she wanted to send any thing back to him, knowing that I’d be there close to his birthday. She said she would drop some things off at my house before I left. Her kids listened closely as their mother spoke of their big brother.

After about thirty minutes waiting, Paula came out of the courtroom, her hands clasped against her chest. "*Gracias a dios,*" she said, "Thank God." That was the most emotion I had seen from her the entire day. She sat down next to us and said that the judge decided to close her case and grant her deferred action status, a form of prosecutorial discretion that delays deportation indefinitely. The deferred action meant that Paula no longer had to report to ICE to do monthly check ins, but it did not grant her any further privileges. But it was enough. It was enough to take her out of the bureaucracy of reporting to ICE and being on their radar. And, it allowed her to continue as Samuel's guardian. She was relieved. So was Aurora.

I left two weeks later for my second trip to Honduras. Aurora and Paula loaded my backpack with items for their distant sons—toys, clothes, cash, candy. When I arrived in Catacamas, the house was emptier. Josue was taller. He told me about school, confirming he still likes math class. I talked with Aurora Sr. about how well Samuel was doing in school, learning English, and being well liked by his teachers and peers. She seemed pleased. Serena and Beti, the two remaining daughters listened eagerly as I described Aurora and Paula's respective living situations. They asked questions. I responded the best I could. Aurora Sr. suggested we take a walk to see the house that was under-construction. It would be their house. Finally. Money sent by Aurora, Paula, and Martin paid for the labor along with donation of materials by a local Catacamas church. Located just a few blocks from their current rental house, the majority of the frame of the new house was already complete with brick walls and about ten different rooms. Each person pointed out which room was theirs. Aurora Sr. laughed as Josue claimed two rooms. The house was located on the edge of the neighborhood. To access it, we had to

walk across two wooden planks that stretched across a canal. Aurora Sr. explained that they were in the process of getting plumbing. There was still a lot of work to be done on the house, but it seemed promising and the family was excited.

That night I talked to Aurora Sr. about life in Catacamas. She gave a superficial "*lo mismo*." The same. But, I knew that couldn't be true. I probed more into how things were. She said that she had a recent experience in which she was robbed in the market. Paula had mentioned the incident to me briefly. Aurora Sr. explained that just like any other day she went to the public market to buy groceries. As she went to the bank to withdraw cash from a Western Union deposit sent from Aurora and Paula, a car pulled up. Two people got out of the car and covered her mouth with a cloth filled with some sort of chemical, which knocked her out cold. They forced her to get the rest of the money out of her account to give it to them. She had no other option but to comply with their demands. She feared for her life. Aurora Sr. said that after she handed over the money to the kidnappers, they let her go. She said that she was targeted because they knew that she had access to money sent from the United States. Remittances she receives monthly from her children made her a target of violence in Catacamas. She showed me bruises that she still had from being knocked out and thrown into the car. I asked her if she knew who had committed the crime and she shook her head, "No. No idea."

When I returned to New Orleans, I caught up with Paula and Aurora to tell them about my trip. They had already heard the story about their mother's attack. I told Paula how big her son is getting. And, I let Aurora know how handsome, mature and respectful Josue has become. I told them about the house and its progress. A few months later, I checked back in with Paula and Aurora. They told me that the house had fallen through.

Aurora said that it got too expensive to finish it. They seemed somewhat disappointed but quickly pointed out that it is for the best because their family needs to get out of that neighborhood. She explained that they are building a house in a different, safer part of town near the university. She seemed optimistic. Plus, Arón finally made it to New Orleans in the fall of 2015. He immediately started work in construction with his older brother, Martin, allowing the family to earn even more money to send back to Catacamas to build the new house. When Arón arrived, he moved in with Paula, splitting a room with Samuel, just like in Barrio Las Lomas. He doesn't talk much about his journey, just confirming what everyone imagined: "it was hard."

With one son behind in Honduras and two younger brothers to provide for in New Orleans, Paula's priorities are her family. Paula's job at Tagine provides the stability to show the judge that she is employed, thus granting her gain custody of Samuel. But, her insufficient wages at Tagine force her to work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. Paula's case is centralized around the idea of family and the importance of family. These are her priorities. And, these ideas of family play a significant role in the configuration of immigration policy and how people are integrated into the communities. Through her family, Paula has been able integrate into the community through the First Grace Church and the Congress of Day Laborers. She has been able to find work through these pre-established networks, which linked her to her job at Tagine and her networks throughout town. But what happens for undocumented individuals that do not have these familial ties in the United States? How do they foster community? What is their recourse for immigration policy? The case of José, a gay, undocumented male, provides another lens through which to examine the vulnerabilities of this population.

José and Josefina

When I first interviewed José in the winter of 2012 he was working at Claudia's Cocina in Mid-City as their head cook. I frequented Claudia's Cocina quite often, first visiting when it opened in November 2011 as an extension of the original Claudia's Cocina located in nearby Kenner. Claudia's Cocina is a small restaurant with a Latin grocery store. In the back of the store is a hot line consisting of a daily supply of stews, beans, soups, and other dishes. Behind the counter, José and one other cook take orders from a line of customers. After visiting Claudia's Cocina a few times, José, a gregarious character, portly in build with long wavy dark hair worn in a ponytail, recognized me as one of the few white people that frequented that space back then. During each visit our interactions increased, with questions like: Where did you learn Spanish? Have you ever been to Mexico? I happily engaged with him, asking him similar questions: Where are you from? How long have you worked here? I typically went to Claudia's Cocina around lunchtime, filing in the long line of construction workers, mostly men getting a quick bite before going back out on the job.

On one occasion early on in our friendship, José questioned me quite candidly, "*Eres gay*." "Are you gay?" I was quite amused, but caught off guard. I looked over my shoulder at the reactions of the other people waiting in line as I nodded my head, "Yes." He chuckled, "I thought so." He replied with what I anticipated, "Me too." From that moment, José and I had a connection—our sexuality. Anytime I would come with a female friend, he would give me an eyewink and ask, "Is that your girlfriend?" To which I would usually say, "no, my friend." But he would always playfully ask about my love interests, ready to quip, "*porque no?* (why not?)" or "*que linda* (how pretty)." Without

fail, José followed up by asking if I knew any guys that speak Spanish to set him up with. I would laugh and tell him I'd see what I could do.

From those interactions, our friendship grew. During our limited talks, he told me that he worked full time at Claudia's Cocina during the day and that he also worked at The Mediterranean Bakery in Metairie during the evenings. Like Paula, José worked double shifts in order to make ends meet. As our conversations evolved, José told me about his work putting on drag shows in New Orleans. I was intrigued by it all. I wanted to know more about how José arrived in New Orleans, about his work in the food industry, about his experience as a member of the undocumented queer community in New Orleans, and about his drag performances in a city full of burlesque, drag, and plenty of ostentatious entertainment. For my first interview with José, it was difficult to get him to sit down and talk candidly, not because he did not want to do the interview, rather he wanted to socialize—drink beer, smoke cigarettes, cook me dinner, hang out at the gay bars on Bourbon Street. After a couple of months of trying to pin down a time to get a formal interview with him, we finally agreed to meet at his house after his shift at Claudia's Cocina.

José welcomed me into his small apartment on the first floor of a house in Mid-City. It was clean and simple, decorated in light greys and whites with a corner dedicated to the Virgin Mary. He offered me a beer and I accepted. "I want to show you something," he said. I indulged, following him into his bedroom. He pushed aside a makeshift curtain, which covered a collection of flashy, sequined dresses, boas, and wigs carefully placed on hangers next to the everyday jeans, khakis, and button-down shirts. He pulled out each dress, explaining to me the drag persona that goes along with each

outfit. “This is Selena,” referencing the deceased Tejana singer, who was murdered by her obsessed fan in 1995 but remains as an icon for the Latinx community. We went through several other outfits. He explained to me the corresponding performance that goes with each costume. I was impressed. I wanted to just ask about his drag performances, but I also wanted to find out more about the context of his work in New Orleans and his shows.

We sat down at the table, with enough distance from the dresses to allow me to focus on the interview. José told me that he is originally from Amatlán de los Reyes, a small municipality in the coastal state of Veracruz. He came to the United States in 2003 because of the lack of jobs in the region and the anti-gay sentiments of his town. Even though Mexico has relatively progressive laws that allow for same-sex civil unions, these policies only became implemented in 2010 and did not pass in José’s state of Veracruz. As recent as May 22, 2016, multiple gunmen targeted a gay nightclub, La Madame, in the city of Veracruz, killing seven people and injuring twelve. Public officials attempted to blame narco-traffickers’ “territorial fights” for the attack, but local advocates and witnesses underscored the homophobia of the violence.[37] This incident occurred just three weeks prior to the massacre in the gay club in Orlando, FL, killing 49 people and injuring 53—almost all were queer, Latinx youth.

José explained that he knew he was gay from a young age, but understood that being gay in his rural community was frowned upon. He said that because they faced such homophobic sentiments and had little opportunities for work, he and his partner had decided to leave their families and friends behind to cross the border together into the United States. Queer undocumented immigrants oftentimes face a double challenge of

coming out both as undocumented and as gay, facing extreme vulnerability living in dual shadows.[38] After crossing the border into Texas, José and his partner ended up in Dothan, Alabama, a semi-rural town with a population of about 60,000. Considered the "Peanut Capital of the United States," Dothan is located in the southeastern corner of the state, just north of Tallahassee, FL and just twenty miles from the Georgia state border. The two ended up in Dothan because friends told them about work available in the area. Prior to leaving Veracruz, José worked off and on in his mother's small restaurant, helping her out for about ten years, before leaving for the United States. Taking a swig of Tecate beer, José said, "First and foremost, I never liked working in the kitchen, but when I came to the United States, people liked the way I cooked, but I still didn't like to be in the kitchen." He stuck with it and worked in various kitchens in Alabama before moving to New Orleans.

José explained that while living in Alabama he began to develop his drag performer identity. He told me that in Dothan he always shopped at a thrift store that was run by the Catholic Church. "There was an older lady there and she knew that I was always looking for dresses. And when a new shipment of used dresses would come in, she would put a few aside for me if she thought they would fit," he explained, as he reached back into his room. He pointed to a dress, "This one is from Dothan (Alabama). I really like it." He came back to the room and continued with his story. "When my ex-boyfriend and I broke up, I needed a change," he said. José explained how he had heard about New Orleans as being a lively and accepting city, especially for the gay community. He had seen movies and pictures of Mardi Gras. He liked the costumes, the feathers, the music and the dancing.

Around that same time, Hurricane Katrina struck and José knew of many Latinx from his area moving to New Orleans for construction work. He realized that was his chance to get out of Dothan and explore something new. He arrived in the city and immediately found a job in the restaurant industry, working in kitchens and doing custodial work. He started in Lorenzo's Buffet located in Jefferson Parish, then worked briefly in a place called La Cantina located in Mid-City neighborhood. José explained that it was easy to find work in the restaurants.

When Claudia's Cocina opened up in Mid-City, José seized the opportunity to work in the kitchen as head cook. He explained that even though it was a Honduran-owned space that he could learn the recipes and have the creative space to introduce some of his dishes from Veracruz. José explained his knack for learning new recipes saying, "when a customer would ask for *biftec a la Ceibeña* (steak from La Ceiba, Honduras), I would go the next day to a Honduran restaurant and order the dish." He described the process of eating the dish slowly to figure out what spices were used in the marinade and in the preparation of the meat. If necessary, he explained, "I would consult with my Honduran friends," until he go it down right. He said the next day he would be able to replicate the dish.

In the spring of 2013, José invited me to one of his drag performances at Los Portales, a Mexican restaurant located off Elysian Fields. When José told me to bring my friends, I knew he meant people from my queer community. I gladly obliged, but I could see his slight disappointment when I showed up with a roomful of queer women. We joined the staff from Claudia's Cocina, which included the owners, several of the bakers, cashiers and José's co-cooks. Our table ordered buckets of Coronas and some food as we

awaited the performance. I had no idea what to expect, but I knew it would be good. The lights dimmed and José, now "Josefina" entered the dining area from a staircase that usually leads to the bathroom of the restaurant. With no real production stage, Josefina used the front area of the restaurant as a platform for the performance.

Dressed in a sequined red dress with wavy black hair flowing, Josefina moved gracefully through the tables where we sat drinking our beer. Lip-synching the words to a Celia Cruz song, Josefina passed my chair, rubbing my shoulder and headed toward the table full of the Claudia's Cocina employees. The crowd erupted, clapping and whistling. The show continued with Josefina as the solo performer, singing six or seven songs as three different personas. I spoke briefly with José's coworkers at Claudia's Cocina. They were equally as entertained and proud of José. More people trickled in as the night went on, with about twenty-five total people arriving in the space. After the show, José, back in his regular jeans and button-down, came out and greeted our table. He was proud of his performance and the crowd that came to support him. He said he'd let me know when the next show would be. I said I would bring even more people.

José and I maintained some communication over the next few months, texting off and on. I ran into him a couple of times at Congress of Day Laborer meetings and we would catch up. Several months after the show, José called me frantically, crying and speaking Spanish rapidly. I could barely make out what he was saying. He exclaimed, "They kidnapped my sister!" I had no idea what to do. I asked him to tell me more about what had happen. He said that narco-traffickers had picked up his sister from their small neighborhood and kidnapped her. In places that have high levels of narco-trafficking, like Veracruz and throughout the Northern Triangle in Central America, individuals that have

family abroad are oftentimes targeted for kidnappings and extortion threats because it is assumed that their family living in the United States has access to wealth to pay a ransom. Many immigrants in the United States fear that call from their communities back home.[39] Organized crime in Veracruz has increased significantly since 2010, with a 94.7% increase from 2013 to 2014.[40] The Gulf Cartel and the Zetas are two groups battling over territory in the state of Veracruz. The Jalisco New Generation cartel is growing in that region having claimed the deaths of five youth in January 2016. Since 2010, seventeen journalist have gone missing or been killed.[41] Along with the states of Guerrero, Mexico, and Tabasco, Veracruz has the highest numbers of reported kidnappings in Mexico.[42]

When I spoke with José he said between sobs, “They are demanding a ransom. They will kill her if I don’t make the payment.” I didn’t know what to do. He had no money to help with a ransom. I gave him the number to an organizer at the Congress of Day Laborers. I told him to talk with her and she could help strategize. After several intense days, José followed up with a text message saying that he thought his sister would be released unharmed soon. With the help of his friends and family, José was able to collect enough money to make the ransom payment and they let her go. No one was apprehended for the kidnapping and José says that he and his family are still uncertain who is responsible other than it was related to the drug trafficking violence in that state. Beyond the lack of jobs and the homophobia, José fled the violence of narco-traffickers that dominate that region.

After that incident, I lost touch with José for a while. I found out that he had left Claudia’s Cocina to work at Serrano’s Taco Stand. When I eventually asked José about

leaving Claudia's Cocina, he did not get into the details, just that he simply disagreed with the management, but has no hard feelings. Around the fall of 2012, José began splitting his time between Serrano's Taco Stand in Mid-City during the evenings and in The Mediterranean Bakery in Metairie during the daytime. At Serrano's Taco Stand, José prepares customized burritos, quesadillas, nachos, for clientele who choose between options like chicken tinga, pork al pastor, fajita, barbacoa, sautéed chicken, or grilled vegetables. Serrano's Taco Stand is a Mexican-American fast-casual restaurant with Oaxacan roots. The restaurant serves fresh ingredients made-to-order, allowing customers to pick their own toppings from one side of a bar with José and his colleagues fulfilling the customized orders on the other side. Five to seven employees work in the kitchen at Serrano's, all dressed in the typical Serrano's uniform—black polo shirt and a black cap adorned with the Serrano's logo embroidered in yellow stitching. José's dark, curly ponytail hangs neatly behind his black cap as he greets customers with a warm smile and accented English. Sometimes José's job is to initiate the customers' orders; other times, he prepares the meats on the stainless steel stovetop just behind the bar.

José speaks highly of his employers—from openly accepting him and other members of the queer Latinx community to their flexibility with is schedule (allowing him to take off some Saturdays for shows). José and his close friend, Teresa, a transgender woman originally from Mexico, but raised in Los Angeles, work together at Serrano's Taco Stand. She and José first met while working at The Mediterranean Bakery and Teresa later helped José to find the job at Serrano's. According to José, at Serrano's Taco Stand, the owners and managers are very accepting of all people and they make an effort to hire people that are bilingual and from Latin America. José explained, "as long

as you work hard, they don't care about your personal decisions," showing that he and his gay community feel welcomed as employees at Serrano's.

José gave an example. He said that during a typical day at work in early 2015, Teresa used the men's restroom during her break. At a little less than six feet tall, with a slender build, and long auburn hair, Teresa passes as a woman. The use of public restrooms is an already complicated process for the transgendered community. In public spaces, such as stores and restaurants, it is often an uncomfortable process in deciding between the men and women's restrooms. The issue has become highly publicized in the public sphere the last couple of years; in May 2016, President Obama passed an executive order directing public schools to allow transgender individuals to use the bathroom that matches their gender, thus sparking outrage with conservatives, particularly in the South. Teresa adhered to the *de facto* protocol of using the men's restroom at Serrano's Taco Stand; it was nothing out of the norm for her. As she left the men's restroom, a man sneered at Teresa, harassing her for her appearance. José explained, "he said really ugly things to her, calling her names, to the point that he almost got violent with her. We didn't know what to do. Nothing like that had happened. Teresa was angry and hurt." Before the situation became physically violent, the manager of Serrano's Taco Stand intervened to make sure that Teresa was unharmed. "He kicked the man out," explained José, "See, that shows that he is on our side." The manager at Serrano's Taco Stand helped foster a safe space for their workers and even put his workers first instead of the customers.

In October 2015, I met José and Teresa at Serrano's Taco Stand to discuss plans for their participation in a festival the next month. José had contacted me to see if I knew

of events occurring where he could perform because he was looking to expand his show from just performing for the Latinx community. Around the same time my friend, with an independent collective of artists based in New Orleans, approached me to see if I knew anyone that could perform in their November event, the Always for Pleasure Festival. He explained that the concept, "Always for Pleasure," alludes to someone who provides pleasure for the community through performative art.[43] I immediately thought of José. I coordinated with each party and we met at Serrano's Taco Stand during Teresa and José's break. José's friend, Coco LaRue, a local musician originally from Venezuela, joined us. We sat on the patio of Serrano's Taco Stand overlooking a bustling intersection on S. Carrollton Avenue. We explained to José that he would be center stage in the parade that would launch the party. José, more focused on his outfit budget than logistics, suggested that Coco LaRue could sing while he performed as Josefina on the front of the float—they would need about an hour of songs and dances to perform in the parade. The rest of the festival attendees would march alongside as they traverse along the Mississippi River through the Holy Cross neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward. José was thrilled.

On the day of the event, Josefina and crew, consisting of Teresa, Coco LaRue, and two other background dancers, showed up ready for the festival. The festival organizers designed a float with a white base and golden prods jutting out in opposite directions like stalagmites rising from the floor of a cave. Josefina dressed in a green and black, fitted bodysuit trimmed with golden sequins and topped off with gold tights, The pièce de résistance of the outfit was an elevated head piece with green feathers spread shoulder-to-shoulder framing Josefina's dark, shoulder-length curls. The other performers matched in green, black, and gold, with more subtle accouterments. As a truck pulled the float,

Figure 14: José, performing as Josefina at Court 13's Always for Pleasure Festival in November 2015. Photo by Claire Bangser.

Josefina and Coco LaRue performed on the stage with Teresa and the others dancing their routines on the back of the float. Between dances, Josefina posed for pictures, took swigs of tequila, and jumped off the float at times to dance with people in the walking parade. It was clear they had practiced hard and spent a long time on their costumes. The crowd loved them. They were a hit, certainly embracing the always for pleasure mantra. Several people I spoke with said that they recognized José/Josefina from Serrano's Taco Stand. His fame has no bounds.

Weeks after the Always for Pleasure event, I received an invite from José to attend his annual Miss Gay Latina Show. Under his newly formed company, José organized a semi-competitive show featuring five female-identifying performers, one of which was Teresa. The event was held on a Sunday night in December 2015 in the suburban town of Kenner, just ten miles outside of New Orleans. Kenner, the city with highest Latinx population in Louisiana, features a strip of Latin restaurants that line one of its main thoroughfares, Williams Boulevard. Miss Gay Latina was held at Drago's Tragos, a Mexican bar and restaurant, located on Williams Boulevard, just two blocks from Lake Pontchartrain. I invited several friends to attend including the crew of

organizers from Court 13. The restaurant was packed. Emceed by Coco LaRue and a community leader named Enrique, the show featured a dance performance by each of the contestants followed by three rounds of costumes: swim wear; "traditional" garb; and, evening attire. Performing in between rounds, José switched back and forth from José to Josefina, seamlessly changing mid-performance from khakis and a blazer to a full-length gown. The majority Latinx male crowd whistled throughout the event, with cheering sections reserved for their corresponding candidates. A panel of judges sat directly in front of the extended stage consisting of local celebreties—artists, health care workers, non-profit directors, and an English-speaking oil rigger (the boyfriend of the emcee, Enrique).

Two community organizations were also present at the Miss Gay Latina show to promote their respective services. The community organization, BreakOut! tabled at the event with information on transgender rights and on their upcoming events. BreakOut! is a New Orleans-based organization that seeks to end the criminalization of LGBTQ youth, working with people of color directly impacted by the criminal justice system.[44] The Congress of Day Laborers provided flyers on their weekly meetings and offered services to the undocumented trans-community. Earlier that fall, community organizers with the Congress of Day Laborers and BreakOut! helped secure the release of an undocumented transgender woman from a nearby immigration detention center. Their efforts prevented this woman from being deported back to San Pedro Sula, Honduras, a city that has seen 54 murders of transgender individuals.[45] The Congress of Day Laborers and BreakOut! also helped to secure the release of another transgender woman, originally from Belize, who was picked up during a raid by ICE officials. Because advocates found out about her

derivative citizenship (one of her parents has U.S. citizenship, which allows her to obtain citizenship), ICE officials released her.[46]

The Congress of Day Laborers and BreakOut! received a joint grant from the LBGTQ Racial Justice Fund to work on anti-criminalization initiatives and to train members on social justice issues. Part of their unlikely partnership includes the campaign, "From VICE to ICE," which develops links between immigrants, people of color, low-wage workers, the LGBTQ community, and youth in New Orleans. Despite language barriers and initial hesitations, the two groups work together to identify and deconstruct the similar challenges they face. Members of each group meet regularly to discuss these parallels, plan actions, and unpack the ties between ICE and the New Orleans Police Department, particularly through the criminalization of their respective communities. José and his crew regularly attend these meetings and events they sponsor, which include mixers, make-up/beautification tutorials, HIV prevention/treatment workshops, marches, and "Know Your Rights" trainings.

Members of BreakOut! and the Congress of Day Laborers initially began their cross-coalition organizing through a collaborative project to produce identification cards for their members. IDs are needed on a daily basis; yet, oftentimes, members of the transgender and undocumented communities do not have access to adequate forms of documentation. Responding to requests from its members, organizers at the Congress of Day Laborers purchased a card printer to produce IDs in 2009. Many of the members have passports and drivers' licenses from their countries of origin; however, these forms of identification are not sufficient because they are written in Spanish. Moreover, passports may even jeopardize the holder's safety by outing them to law enforcement as

being from elsewhere, thus making them even more susceptible to questions regarding immigration status.

Day laborers and their families can get an ID card by paying $10 and attending a minimum of three meetings. The ID cards state their name, birthdate, expiration date, and have a photo on the front of the card. The back of the card reads in English that the cardholder is a member of the Congress of Day Laborers and is represented by a legal department. It provides two telephone numbers to contact for further information. Local law enforcement officials are aware of the Congress of Day Laborers-issued ID cards considering over 800 members have been issued these IDs since 2009. Members have successfully used these ID cards during traffic stops, car accidents, and as identification to enter federal buildings.

The Congress of Day Laborers frequently loans BreakOut! their ID machine so that transgender members of BreakOut! can create their own ID cards that aptly represents them. Many transgendered people are humiliated and misrepresented through state-issued documentation because they are forced to have an ID card that does not reflect them as they appear on a daily basis. The Louisiana Office of Motor Vehicles' antiquated policy from 1986 states that, "At no time will an applicant be photographed when it is obvious he/she is misrepresenting his/her gender and/or purposely alternating his/her appearance in an effort which would misguide/misrepresent" his/her identity.[47] The state policy also requires that to change the gender identity on a new ID, the individual must bring "a medical statement signed by a physician stating that the applicant has undergone a successful gender change/reassignment."[48] The ID machine allows BreakOut! and the Congress of Day Laborers to provide ID cards for their

members that confirm their identity. The solidarity between these two organizations illustrates the similar ways these communities experience criminalization.

José has an ID from the Congress of Day Laborers, but says he does not need one from BreakOut!, because he "presents as a man out in public." But, many of his friends, including Teresa, have ID cards from BreakOut!. José explains that the collaboration between these organizations is important because the trans undocumented community is "extremely vulnerable" and they are located "*por todos los lados*." Everywhere. The Miss Gay Latina show helped confirm that observation. Later that night, Teresa won the competition. José placed a sash around her as he handed her a bouquet of flowers. She stood proud on the center stage at Drago's Tragos, in a space, where a queer undocumented man and a trans Latinx woman can express themselves freely without the fears of ICE, or police, or hetero-normative bigotry.

For José, his restaurant work has provided a place for him to make a living, cultivate a queer community, and be open. Claudia's Cocina, The Mediterranean Café, and Serrano's Taco Stand have been supportive workplaces of his identity—as queer and undocumented. Even Drago's Tragos restaurant has been supportive of this community by allowing them to host multiple Miss Gay Latina shows in their space. In this sense, these places of businesses support these individuals less as covert operations and more as public celebrations of their spirit, work ethic, and community contributions.

Conclusion

José and Paula's experiences are analogous, with comparable vulnerabilities as undocumented service industry workers balancing two low-wage jobs to make ends meet. Both are loyal to their families back at home, having each gone through the trauma of

having a family member targeted by violence (Aurora Sr. and Paula's brothers) and kidnapped (José's sister). José and Paula both realize the dire situation of the violence that plagues their hometowns. At the same time, José and Paula represent a class of workers that came to New Orleans escaping violence and poverty at home, adding to the growing service industry economy in the city. As told through their stories, their hardships go beyond the challenges they face in the front and in the back of their restaurants.

As these restaurants serve as spaces that provide steady jobs and social networks for undocumented workers, they fail to provide enough money to survive, as wages remain stagnant and workers face harsh conditions working long hours and juggling two jobs. In the case of Carola, the bathroom attendant originally from El Salvador, deregulation allows these types of illegal subcontract jobs to exist. These low wages force José and Paula to work two jobs each at almost eighty hours per week at extremely low wages below ten dollars per hour. National Restaurant Association (NRA) argues that increasing wages will bankrupt small business owners and cause to much government oversight. Organizations like the Congress of Day Laborers, ROC and UNITE HERE firmly disagree.

But, through her steady job at Tagine and loyalty to her family, Paula was able to verify to a judge that she was fit to be the guardian of her younger brother. Despite her undocumented status, she proved her legitimacy in the eyes of the court. Even though her deferred action status remains precarious, Paula was able to avoid deportation charges, a fate that happens to so many individuals who face these immigration courts. Samuel was able to secure SIJS status, which will ultimately benefit his entire family. Paula's

deferred action is predicated on the idea of family, a major component of contemporary immigration law. With the Hart Celler Immigration Act of 1965, immigration shifted from a labor issue to reuniting families. This act laid the foundations for future immigration reform with similar priorities.

The two most recent attempts at immigration reform by the Obama Administration, Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), are grounded in protecting families and children. But these options are shortsighted, leaving out many individuals, like José, that don't fit into these categories. Even though José fled Mexico because of the rampant homophobia, he has little recourse for gaining any sort of legalization based within the current rhetoric of immigration reform. The 2015 Supreme Court ruling that same-sex couples can get married extended to undocumented individuals, but only if they marry (and are sponsored by) U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents.[49] For José to qualify for that, his partner would have to be a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident, which is not the case.

But, José has cultivated his own safety nets through his work in the food industry and through the networks he has forged in the city. José fits within the general spirit of New Orleans, which prioritizes performance, costuming, self-expression, and other creative outlets as methods of survival and building community. As José prepares made-to-order tacos and burritos and Paula works as a dishwasher for a high-end restaurant, they are more than just cogs in the wheel that keeps the restaurant industry afloat; they are more than just offshoots of failed neoliberal policies that thrive on this deregulation and cheap labor. José and Paula are capable workers that seek dignity in a city that welcomes them one day, then unwelcomes them the next. The nuance of their stories—as

a drag queen on a parade float or as a concerned older sister—conveys both their struggles and successes in gaining political and cultural legitimacy in New Orleans.

Chapter Six

Conclusion: Politicize Food and Value Labor

At the center of these stories is food, a subject that has increasingly been depoliticized in order to make it more palatable for the consumer. But, to depoliticize food, you must devalue the labor that goes into the production of food—from the farm to the chopping board to the dishwasher. While the stories told through this research, at times, are dark, their lives are not tragic. They are resistant and strong. In order to provide for themselves and their families, these individuals fight against multiple forces—from displacement or violence in their countries of origin, to their constant vulnerability due to deportation threats. And, in spite of these barriers and limitations, these individuals are able to forge their own communities and networks through participation in churches, soccer teams, and community organizations like the Congress of Day Laborers.

From José's drag shows in Dragos Tragos restaurant and Mateo's fleet of *loncheras* to Gus's Garifuna community in Barra Vieja, this research exposes the underbelly of the broader political economy that demands and consumes this Latinx labor and culture yet criminalizes and disenfranchises the people that produce it. These complicated stories are tied together by their undocumented status, their work in the food industry, and their challenges in facing legitimacy as they build community in New Orleans and abroad. At the same time, these narratives illustrate the resistance of these

individuals and their communities in refusing to fit within the mold forced upon them by the oftentimes impossible expectations of the broader political structures.

In this sense, the stories in this research internationalize the challenges that the undocumented population faces by highlighting the transnational impacts that foster migration to the United States. And, they underscore the neoliberal paradox that prides its self on small government, but is actually supported and maintained by big government through federally mandated machines like ICE. The red tape and bureaucracy abhorred by promoters of freewheeling enterprises get shifted from the regulation of labor standards to the regulation of the laborer. At the same time, the mainstream media and politicians are quick to point out the illegality of a migrant crossing the border, a misdemeanor crime. But these same sources are even quicker to turn a blind eye to the policies that dismantle jobs in the formal sector, devastate the environment for corporate interests, and continue to financially and militarily support undemocratic regimes that back unconstitutional policies and force migrants to flee.

And, in Louisiana, even as these undocumented migrants and their families continue to play a major role in the construction and service industry economies, this community continues to be demonized and marginalized. For example, on August 15, 2016, almost eleven years after Katrina, Baton Rouge experienced major flooding causing damage to over 110,000 homes and displacing thousands of people. Volunteers and paid workers—including hundreds of Latinx day laborers—quickly mobilized to respond to the devastation, helping people to clean out and gut homes and businesses. On August 26, 2016, a group of Latinx day laborers boarded a bus to head to Baton Rouge to help with clean up efforts. On the way to the clean up the site, the breaks on the bus

malfunctioned and the bus lost control, ultimately crashing into public officials responding to a previous accident. Three people died. The driver, a Honduran undocumented worker, was apprehended and charged with negligent homicide. Headlines across the nation vilified the driver for operating without a license, for his “illegal” status, and referenced his previous citations for driving without a license.

The incident, no doubt tragic, caused immediate scapegoating of the driver. His immigration status stood at the forefront of this tragedy. His presence was deemed illicit, as the public failed to recognize the barriers that make getting a driver’s license impossible for the millions of undocumented people that live in the thirty-eight states that prevent them from doing so.[1] Further, news sources were quick to point out that the Honduran driver and the individuals he transported on the bus were not volunteers, further vilifying their labor as not one of goodwill, thus devaluing not just the worker but also work. These news sources failed to address the broader critique of disaster response and failures of the state, which are too dependent on volunteer services for such massive efforts. [2] Moreover, these disaster response efforts at once vilify and rely on the work by day laborers. The labor of these workers is indispensible even though their lives are rendered disposable, invisible, and deportable.

Latinx day laborers are consistently among the early responders during Louisiana disasters—Katrina in August 2005, tornado devastation in Laplace, LA in February 2016, and the major flooding in Baton Rouge in August 2016. In Baton Rouge, day laborers have already established their *esquinas*. Following right behind them are tamale vendors and *loncheras* that use improvised food systems to feed these workers. In some ways, these improvised food systems have become systemized because of the frequency of their

services, but not yet legitimized in the eyes of the state. As the state continues to battle with these threats of flooding (as wetlands continue to disappear, pipelines are dug, and oil industries continue to operate unregulated), the work of these day laborers is imperative and necessitates their state-sponsored legitimization.

Drawing attention to these contradictory power structures exposes shortcomings on a broader, more macro-level as well. Transnationally, these examples show how many individuals were forced out of their Honduran communities because of corruption, violence, and state-sponsored displacement—military backing of private, unfettered enterprises. As evidenced through these stories, oftentimes our own free-trade policies like NAFTA as well as our insatiable appetites for tourism, palm oil, and even cocaine are the transnational forces that drive much of this migration. Thus, individuals are forced out of Mexico and Central America, with nowhere to go but to the United States. Once they cross the border, they become undocumented workers. In places like New Orleans post-Katrina, the deregulation of federal labor requirements—from wage standards to protections on the job—aggravated the vulnerabilities of this already disenfranchised community. Nevertheless, these individuals—oftentimes without other options—stay in the communities they helped to rebuild, establishing their own families and networks. But, the same neoliberal system that brought them in continues to push them out through gentrification and, more explicitly through intimidation and deportation, denying them their rights and dignity.

But, academics and even community organizers get caught up calling for dignity and dignified labor. Sadly, these calls oftentimes fall onto deaf ears because much of the dominant discourse is so far detached from this concept of dignity. Increasingly within

the neoliberal framework, the big government is to blame for the increased social imbalance and social inequity, even though big government has been significantly downsized since the early 1980s. The increased privileges and wealth of the elite help to reframe this narrative from lack of dignity to lack of work ethic, and collective bargaining has been replaced with bootstrapped individualism. As the degradation of labor continues to extend to all parts of the workforce, deficiencies and risk increasingly fall onto the backs of the worker rather than employer or the state. Thus, these pleas for dignity go unheard, not because they are without merit, rather, because they have become so foreign within a broader neoliberal discourse of work.

The increased "formality" of the informal sector captures this tension, as neoliberal restructuring increasingly pushes people into the informal sector—from freelance writers to street vendors—and following trends long established in Latin America.[3] The stories used in this research illustrate the blurred lines between these two sectors, particularly showing how jobs traditionally considered to be part of the formal sector are taking on characteristics and standards of the informal economy. For example, the story of Carola who works as a bathroom attendant in a Bourbon Street bar demonstrates how service industry employees oftentimes fall into the cracks of the deregulated industries, working long hours and lacking consistency or predictability in their wages. They are off-the-books employees and hired by contractors. Within these layers of contracts, Carola works long hours during the night shift, but only gets paid in the tips she earns (she must pay her boss twenty percent). There is little oversight and less recourse, pushing the job within the realm of the informal sector. But, Carola values the flexibility, which is oftentimes the appeal of this type of work.

This flexibility is precisely what drew Clara from the formal sector—working as a housekeeper in a hotel—to selling tamales on the street. Clara, a mother of five, is able to prepare her foods at home and then sell her tamales and other prepared plates at the Congress of Day Laborer meeting nearby. She occasionally picks up extra gigs selling food at other community events. When she needs to, she returns to the hotel industry to make extra money. Clara's vision is to get licensed and open up her own *lonchera,* therefore the informal economy is just her stepping-stone. But, even then, she explained that she just wants to put the *lonchera* in front of her house, thus allowing her the flexibility to be at home and work at the same time.

In contrast, for Magda, the informal economy was not an option because of the precarity it entailed. After the director of the One Stop Shop business center at City Hall denied her the license to get her *lonchera,* the director suggested to Magda that she operate her *lonchera* without a license. The city official directed her into the informal economy, hinting at the fact that the city does not have enough staff to actually regulate the licensing of the food trucks across the city. But, Magda knew that was not true. Through her own experience working on Taqueria El Gato I, she had many negative encounters with Officer Maldonado, the Colombian-American policeman. Magda claimed (and I corroborated) that he has a propensity for frequenting *loncheras*: eating first, and then ticketing the *loncheras* for petty infractions.[4] In Magda's case it was the *city* that encouraged her to enter into the precariousness of the informal, unlicensed economy, which reveals layers of incongruity. But, one thing Magda knew for sure was that *loncheras* are regulated, not necessarily by a city task force, but by officers like Maldonado who like to direct their powers onto the most vulnerable. In this case, his

surveillance fell onto the undocumented community, which faces much stricter repercussions to these violations especially in the current anti-immigrant climate where even a minor infraction can be cause for deportation.

Thus, Officer Maldonado's penchant for food from the *lonchera* and his concomitant regulation of the *lonchera* workers provides a useful anecdote for the broader lack of understanding of this cultural production labor and the power structures that foster these systems of oppression: the desire for the culture—the food—but failing to grasp the broader structures of inequality and disenfranchisement of the worker and the laborer. And, the example illustrates a failed understanding of the layers of bureaucracy of owning a *lonchera* and the shortsighted policy surrounding these small-businesses.

In the two cases I witnessed in 2012, Maldonado ticketed the *lonchera* for not moving the truck within the mandated forty minutes—a policy that was updated in 2014, but rarely enforced even now. The *lonchera* only serves food at one place, maintaining a consistent clientele of day laborers, contractors, and the occasional non-Latinx. Providing a food option in somewhat of a food desert, the *lonchera* filled a void as it sat off the side of the road on public property. Yet, Maldonado failed to recognize the complexity of the *lonchera;* rather, he saw it as a black and white issue in which the vendors broke the law. Moreover, by enforcing inadequate policy and failing to understand the realities of this *lonchera,* Maldonado also devalued the clientele—the day laborers and contractors that frequent the *lonchera*.

Thus, scholars like Arlene Dávila and Sharon Zukin address this shortcoming in valuing this labor that accompanies the culture. Dávila makes a call for there to be new methods of evaluation that incorporate cultural work. Zukin argues that developers,

lawmakers, and community members must understand culture from a bottom-up perspective that grasps the local realities from the working class people not the national trends. I further argue, that we must understand the transnational processes of these systems as well. For example, for Tela Café, gentrification in the Mid-City neighborhood is bringing in what Zukin calls "homogeneity of mass culture" through public-private developments that neglect the tastes and needs of the local culture and workers. These are global trends. Santiago's community near Tela, Honduras and Gus's Garifuna community are facing similar struggles of displacement due to corporate imperialism that foster this homogeneity and leave out the voices of the communities in those areas.[5]

Similarly, class, race, and immigration status each play a major role in what Dávila calls the "hierarchies of culture," positing that we must take into account these hierarchies and understand more holistically the contributions and these cultural producers.[6] As third generation Mexican-Americans, Tommy and Karen are able to use their "hierarchies of culture" (immigration status and class) to maximize on their cultural production. Simply, as U.S. citizens, they are able to market their product publicly, have adequate licensing (including drivers' licenses), and face minimal repercussions if they are caught selling in prohibited areas. Meanwhile, Clara and Leonora face much more limited mobility in their respective enterprises. Even though Leonora has her green card, her immigration status is still precarious in that a civil infraction could jeopardize her status. Clara is at most risk, operating much more clandestinely and, for the most part, within the sanctuary of the church grounds.

Likewise, Mateo's relationship with his mentor, Carlos, helps to illustrate the hierarchies of culture (and mobility). Because Carlos—a U.S. resident that speaks

English—is a seasoned veteran in the food truck industry, he has been able to show Mateo the ropes of the industry, significantly reducing his barriers of entry into this field. By learning the "practical norms," Mateo is able to stay up to date on policy changes, fees, and inspections; he even drops Carlos' name to the authorities when needed.[7] Thus, the social capital through Carlos' immigration status, street-smarts, and language skills helped foster Mateo's successes with his Taqueria Aguila fleet.

For better or worse, little recognition is given to these *loncheras* that operate throughout the city. Instead, policy makers and the media focus attention on the rise in "gourmet food trucks." Yet, the growth of "gourmet food trucks" in New Orleans shows how national trends *and* recent traditions of *loncheras* in the city helped pave way for the legislation and growing popularity of these mobile food vendors.[8] David Beriss posits, "The trucks and the many new Latino restaurants in the city profoundly changed the range of Mexican and Central American food available in New Orleans. The taco trucks seem, however, to have led the way for another new development, the arrival of what might be called 'gourmet' food truck."[9] Likewise, Jeffrey Pilcher addresses this growing popularity by stating, "The trucks originally served a predominantly Latino, working class clientele by setting up shop near factories, plazas, and soccer fields. More recently, however, taco trucks have become sites of culinary tourism for Anglos searching for ethnic exoticism."[10] But, the problem is that these national trends, not the local realities, continue to shape local policy and reception, thus neglecting the lived experiences of the cultural producers.

With the case of Mateo and Magda, the same city regulations that enabled Mateo to build a fleet of *loncheras* across New Orleans denied Magda the chance to start her

own enterprise. These cases show how even policies meant to include individuals end up excluding them because they fail to take into account these realities. Mateo was grandfathered into an antiquated system as policymakers scrambled to update the policy. Yet, the more liberal, newer policy failed to take into account how these food trucks and trailers were actually being used around the city—as self-propelled food trucks *and* as trailers. Instead, they drafted policy that focused on the idealized version of a food truck, fitting within national trends.

Likewise, more than just defining policy, national trends play a significant role in how these food vendors are portrayed in the media and by the general public. Dávila warns against falling for "dominant definitions," in this case national trends that determine cultural value and, thus, policy.[11] Speaking directly to the media influence on the construction of these foods and cultural economies, Jeffrey Pilcher argues that "notions of Mexican food have been invented by promoters of culinary tourism."[12] Local press in New Orleans helps to shape the perceptions of these Latinx communities for the English-speaking audience, by favoring higher-end restaurants and overpriced tacos instead of working class vendors that cater to working class clientele.

In February 2015, the local public television network WYES aired a documentary entitled *Latino Cuisine in New Orleans*. The description, albeit brief, leaves out the Honduran community, stating that the film "explores the diversity and history of Latin American cuisine, which is inspired by numerous countries—from Mexico and Colombia, to Cuba and Brazil."[13] The documentary does minimally address the Honduran population in the film, but in the website and advertisement for the film, it fails to mention this group despite the fact that Hondurans make up the majority of the Latinx

population in the city. Moreover, the film essentially leaves out the narrative of post-Katrina food vendors that played such an important role, preferring, instead, to convey a depoliticized, multicultural image that prioritizes the higher-end Latinx establishments. In this case, the media is quick to celebrate the food, but not the laborer and the realities.

Similarly, food critic, Ian McNulty, celebrates what he considers to be the increased presence of Mexican food in the city. In 2015, McNulty wrote an article for *The New Orleans Advocate* entitled, "In a City Suddenly Full of Mexican Food, a Chef-led Approach Stands Apart at Johnny Sánchez," highlighting the partnership between New Orleans acclaimed chef, John Besh and Aarón Sánchez in opening the high-end Mexican restaurant.[14] In a previous article, McNulty cites the surge of Mexican restaurants opening and/or expanding in the city, which tend to be pricier versions of Mexican cuisine.[15] Currently, these working class Latinx foods have become eclipsed by high-end, sanitized versions of themselves.[16] As acclaimed chefs like Besh devise their own iterations of Latinx food culture, providing the city with Latin-Creole fusions and luring elite crowds with twelve and fourteen dollar tacos, these smaller, more clandestine places offer lesser-known dishes like Honduran *baleadas* and *pollo con tajadas* that tell a much more complicated story of linkages between the Crescent City and Latin America.[17]

The emergence of these higher-end Mexican establishments fits within the post-Katrina increase of restaurants and the rising Latinx population. However, the sole distinction of "Mexican" restaurants provides little parallel representing the actual Latinx population in New Orleans. Instead, McNulty links the surge to a larger, more mainstream fad suggesting the increase is due to Mexican food as "a hot trend

nationally."[18] McNulty's reporting, featured in a major New Orleans newspaper, illustrates the welcoming of these Mexican restaurants; however, this hype is limited to high-end Mexican cuisine.[19] To McNulty's credit, he did report on restaurants like Tela Café, but these reviews were published in smaller outlets like the free alternative weekly newspaper, *Gambit.* Likewise, Brett Anderson, food critic for the *Times-Picayune,* also reported on this increase in Mexican restaurants, asking (but not answering), "Why did it take so long for Mexican food to explode in New Orleans?"[20] This particular type of publicity leaves out the working class Mexican and Central American population and fails to draw in the labor and, instead, romanticizes the culture.

These spaces represent higher-end restaurants that opened up after Katrina and capitalized on the "national trends" popularizing Mexican foods. They also represent the erasure of these working class restaurants and *loncheras*—Mexican and Honduran owned—that emerged immediately after Katrina. Pilcher argues, "The pursuit of authentic tacos, whether real or virtual, contains its own cultural politics, not so much a democratic acknowledgement of blue-collar food but rather a new form of distinction."[21] To answer Brett Anderson's question, I say that this Mexican (and Honduran) food "exploded" immediately after Katrina, but laid-low and in the shadows due to the marginalization and criminalization of these "blue-collar foods," food producers, and clientele. Will media coverage of Latinx-owned *loncheras* end the ostracism of this community? Not really, but it will help to legitimize the role of these Latinx entrepreneurs in the city and contextualize the value of this culture and their labor. But whose responsibility is it to facilitate these changes?

Academic-Led Change

Scholars like Néstor Canclini call for researchers to design projects that investigate and explain the inequities and tensions between and within cultures within the context of the broader capitalist economy. Research that takes on a transnational lens into these migration processes and the power distribution will help to understand these experiences more holistically. With that knowledge, policy makers and community leaders will be able to better address these communities on a more macro-level. For example, understanding the levels of violence and corruption plaguing Honduras, could lead to more humanistic approaches to policy that help to redefine refugee and asylum seekers within this context. As shown through the introduction, immigration policy is not static; it is malleable and discretionary to ostensibly be used to protect the people most in need. Thus, there is space to define and redefine the terms within these policies in order to provide more equitable and just responses.

Along with addressing immigration policy, further inquiry into these transnational (and unconstitutional) programs like the ZEDEs and the multinational development projects should call out the corruption and devastation of these projects on the local communities to reframe these development strategies and make more room for the voice of the communities most impacted. But, because of the rampant killings of community leaders like Berta Cáceres, these studies and activism must be global in scope in that they must come from transnational alliances, informed by bottom-up narratives and leadership. Scholars can help collect the stories from these individuals.

Moreover, through applied research and by employing accompaniment methodology, scholars can develop a firsthand account of the impacts of policies on

people, not just by observing these processes, but also by actively engaging in these experiences *with* the people. This groundwork can help to inform publications, reports, and public scholarship in order to create tangible and accessible knowledge responding to the needs of the workers and their families. These actions should help create awareness that goes beyond the academy. Similarly, much of my research is conducted in the field in the same city where I study. While I understand the limitations of this as a regular practice, community-engagement of scholars can help to deconstruct the divides between campus and community, encouraging community organizations to take advantage of university benefits—archives, funds, space; inviting community leaders to speak on campus; and, developing service learning projects that put students into the field. While much of these recommendations may sound tautological, the coming era—in which the only certainty is massive deregulation—will necessitate these collaborations with much more exigency and on a much larger scale.

Consumer-Led Change

Consumer-led change through technology is a way to address this general lack of cohesion between our dominant understandings of culture and actual cultural production labor. This disjuncture is most evident in social media apps like Yelp or Trip Advisor. The culture—the foods, the ingredients, the service, and the experience—are evaluated at the whim of the consumer. Stars are assigned to the experience and commentary is optional. These apps oftentimes come up first before the food establishment's own webpage. While restaurant owners are able to respond to or defend themselves within the online forum, the voice of the worker is left out completely. Instead, the performance of the server, line cook, busser, and even manager are evaluated and publicly posted by the

consumer. Through these forums there is little to no evaluation given to the labor that goes into the production of cultural experience. The perspective of this cultural production is only through the lens of the consumer and reproduced by all the views and likes by the public. The broader public becomes the consumer, the worker is hidden, and the culture is celebrated in a limited and idealized context.

In response, Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC) started a "Yelp for labor rights app" in 2012. The aim of the app was to inform users about restaurants' specific policies—if they pay a living wage, offer any benefits, provide paid sick leave, offer non-discriminatory program for internal promotion.[22] The user fills out the form for the restaurant and ROC employees confirm the data. Thus, the consumer spearheads the inquiry, demonstrating to the food establishments that these are issues of concern. While the merits of the app are of great value, the lifespan of the app was limited. When I tried to access the app, it said it was no longer available. Nevertheless, a consumer-led campaign that values labor rights within the food industry would help put pressure on food establishments to improve workplace conditions. Yet, making this a priority for the consumer is the real challenge and clearly one that ROC has already faced. Developing similar technologies with broader reach, could perhaps be consumer-led alternative that incorporates social media.

Community-Led Change

On a community level, cooperative models for street vendors have been effective in addressing the needs of both the culture and cultural producers, particularly in cities like Austin, TX; Vista, CA; San Diego, CA; and, Nashville, TN. In many of these cases, women have joined forces to create a collective model of tamale production with more

formalized assembly, distribution, and marketing, while also enabling the women to maintain flexible schedules to care for young children.[23] The collective model directly defies the neoliberal sensibilities as it allows for individuals to work together and develop lucrative yet balanced systems. Likewise, sustainable programming, such as small-business lending organizations, helps provide more financial stability for these migrant communities and their budding enterprises. In the Bay Area, the group Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA) developed the Adelante Fund, which provides small loans to these aspiring immigrant business owners in the food industry to help them get started and help navigate the obstacles in opening up a business.[24] These cooperatives and lending programs offer sustainable solutions for this small-business community, valuing the culture and addressing the financial realities of the cultural producer.

Moreover, on a community level alliances that span and intersect race, class, gender, and immigration status are essential in building ties and forming united communities that focus directly on the needs of these workers (and their clientele). Such calls for collective solidarity are not groundbreaking, having been a repeated mantra of conclusions in activist literature for decades; nonetheless, as the demands of organizations are heightened due to increased deficiencies and failed neoliberal policies, it is essential that these organizations—from unions to youth groups—broaden strategies and build broad-based movements for social justice to go beyond just the direct needs of their constituents.

Andrew Ross states that this activism needs to be part of a "broader coalition" to locate the "common target," positing that "labor exploitation is no longer a single-issue struggle, but rather one of an array of concerns that the public cannot easily ignore."[25]

Thus, as neoliberal policies continue to pit low income and communities of color against each other, these groups must expose and disrupt this strategy rejecting these divisive motives that are fueled by profits and profit-seekers. These broadminded visions are essential in creating sustainable solutions that address the realities of these individuals most affected.

The partnership between BreakOut! and the Congress of Day Laborers exhibits one successful collaboration in which these groups have identified their similar struggles, developing their own VICE to ICE campaign. Aligning such unseeming allies—BreakOut!, an LGBTQ rights group, along with Congress of Day Laborers—has helped these members locate their similar battles with criminalization and discrimination and develop strategies to respond to these challenges. Strong leadership within each of these agencies along with the stories of shared experiences between the members helped garner empathy and awareness of the depth of this institutionalized racism and oppression. These organizations have since joined forces on multiple campaigns with a steadfast commitment to backing one another—in the courtroom, on the streets, and, even, socially. Through skill-shares these groups have identified similar needs like using the identification machine to make ID cards for members. And, this solidarity has helped shape policy through bottom-up solutions that adequately address the needs of these disenfranchised communities.

Large-scale collaborations—beyond just local community organizations—are essential as well. This solidarity must be transnational in scope, linking with organizations in nations that deny human rights and that embrace unconstitutional practices, in order to provide a voice for these vulnerable groups through a global

platform. These alliances can help draw attention to these injustices, call on international agencies to deal with these nations, and pressure governments to address the people in a way that understands and responds to the local needs, rather than private interests. Through these mechanisms, larger patterns of continuous displacement and corruption perpetuated by deregulation and privatization will be exposed, putting an end to exploitative practices; allowing people to remain in their communities; and better informing lawmakers so that they may craft future social policies that aptly address the needs of the people.

David Harvey contends, “the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”[26] For the Congress of Day Laborers, it is precisely *through* their undocumented status and the discrimination that comes with it that they are empowered and able to take on local, state, and national legislators. As such, members of the Congress of Day Laborers exercise their freedom to “make and remake” their communities, creating alliances, developing leaders, drafting policies, and tweaking national campaigns to fit local needs. Meanwhile, as the broader public relaxes within blind comforts and privileges of unfettered capitalism, their safeties and securities are increasingly imperiled as the degradation of labor (and the environment) extends beyond just marginalized communities.

Examining the role of these foods and food establishments, owned or operated by this vulnerable community, speaks to the tensions within a neoliberal economy and illustrates the failures of this structure to grasp these realities from the bottom up. These examples serve as a warning for threats that we face within the Trump administration’s

polices which are based in rampant deregulation, increased prioritization of the private sector, and a beefed-up surveillance to protect these private interests. Nevertheless, it is through these same structures of deregulation that these undocumented individuals are able to resist, responding to these injustices and creating their own thriving networks by employing similar tactics of defiance to regulations. Analyzing how these undocumented workers learn to navigate these complicated processes maps onto the struggles other working class groups face as well. Only by understanding these stories and locating these realities will we be able to shape policy that actually addresses local needs of the people.

Notes to pages 1-38

Chapter One: Introduction: Tacos and Gumbo

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[11] Julie Weise, *Corazon de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910,* (Raleigh: UNC Press Books, 2015), 18-20.

[12] Julie Weise, *Corazon de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910,* (Raleigh: UNC Press Books, 2015), 21.

[13] Weise, *Corazon de Dixie,* 22.

[14] Richard Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics before the Storm,* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006), 193–203; "New Orleans: Gateway to the Americas," accessed January 12, 2017, http://nutrias.org/exhibits/gateway/bolivar.htm; The Garden to the Americas, situated along Basin Avenue parallel to New Orleans' French Quarter, features statues of Latin American leaders like Simon Bolivar, "the Great Liberator" of South America; Benito Juarez, the first indigenous president in Latin America; and Francisco Morazán, the Honduran statesman and second president of the Central American Republic. In 1957, New Orleans Mayor Chep Morrison, a major proponent of trade with Latin America, commissioned the construction of the Garden to the Americas as part of a beautification project in recognition of the commercial ties between New Orleans and the nations of the Americas. Along with a shared history of colonization by Spain (the Spanish Crown's control of New Orleans lasted from 1762-1800), the garden is just another example of how the city of New Orleans maintains strong traces of its Caribbean and Gulf neighbors.

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