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From Pupusas to Chimichangas: Exploring the Ways in which Food Contributes to the Creation of a Pan-Latino Identity

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From *Pupusas* to Chimichangas: Exploring the Ways in which
Food Contributes to the Creation of a
Pan-Latino Identity

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Urban Studies
Anthropology

by

Sarah Bianchi Fouts

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ABSTRACT

Framed through the standardizations of food and generalizations of people, this research explores the shifting ingredients of migrant identities and the ethnic foodways carried with them as they cross the border into the United States. Using ethnographic observational fieldwork, content analysis of menus, and semi-structured interviews with restaurant staff and migrant workers, this study examines the transnational narratives of the day laborer population and their *detrterritorialized* food culture in post-Katrina New Orleans. Further, this research explores this flow of people and culture through a globalization lens in order to achieve a more holistic understanding of the “migrant experience” and how Latinos are both defined and self-defined within an increasingly global context.

Keywords

Pan-ethnic, Latinos, foodways, day laborers, Latin American, immigration, authenticity, globalization, transnationalism, identity

I. INTRODUCTION

“Once upon a time, pre-Katrina, I couldn't walk a few blocks from my house and get a cow tongue quesadilla. In fact, it never crossed my mind that it would ever be possible. The hurricane brought more downsides than we need to dredge up, but the upside is tacos. Trucks and carts cooking up all varieties of Mexican tacos, and *gorditas*, and *tortas*, and quesadillas; all served with tall, glass, iced bottles of Coca-Cola. Yum. When I saw the masses of Latinos coming to the city to help us rebuild, I was thrilled. I had spent my post Katrina New Orleans hiatus in Arizona, and picked up a solid addiction to cheap tacos...real Mexican style, soft shell, grilled onions, charred peppers, lime juice and meat. We knew that following the workers would soon be their wives, and more importantly, their food trucks. We were not disappointed.”

-Jeff S. written in 2009 in a review on Yelp.com for Los Poblanos #2 Taco Truck

Hidden behind the gas station right off of Martin Luther King Street on the lake side of Claiborne Avenue is a small, white trailer with a line of people waiting to order food. The Mexican *lonchera* (food truck) and its accompanying Ford F-150 blend into the mass of cars and automobiles waiting to be repaired at the body shop behind the gas station. The *lonchera* has no sign painted on the trailer, but part-owner Cristina says they hope to purchase one soon. “It will be called Taqueria Falcón,” she says, “It is our family’s last name.” Cristina began the food truck with her husband, brother, and sister-in-law in early 2006.

The family, originally from Chiapas, Mexico, arrived in New Orleans from Tennessee shortly after Katrina. Her husband arrived first and then sent for the rest of his family to come join him in the Crescent City. Regarding her arrival to New Orleans, Cristina says, “He (her husband) told me to come here, and he said that there is work. Before I came, I worked in a McDonald’s in Tennessee.” But, she said her husband told her to come down there because they had workers, and McDonald’s “paid \$9 an hour.” She said, “I made \$6 an hour there (in Tennessee).” Cristina followed her husband to New Orleans in late 2005.

While Cristina was working at McDonald’s averaging 20-30 hours a week and raising two children, her husband stopped getting paid regularly, despite working long hours for a contractor in New Orleans. She realized she needed to earn more money to make ends meet, so

she began making tamales in the mornings on the days when she did not have to work at McDonald's. She said, "I saw that the tamales were selling — selling a lot. I was earning more selling tamales than working in McDonald's. Once I realized that, I left." Every day she made tamales early in the morning and then around 5 P.M., she went to the construction sites near her apartment "where the Hispanic people were" and sold the tamales. Cristina said that by 7 P.M. she returned home, having sold between 100-130 tamales each evening.

"That was the beginning," she said. Then she started to see that people wanted more than just tamales, so she started making Mexican food—empanadas, *gorditas*, tacos, burritos, quesadillas. She began selling them exclusively on Martin



Fig. 1. Mexican Gordita from Taqueria Sanchez

Luther King Street and Claiborne Avenue because people used that space to wait for contractors to pick them up for jobs. She said, "So we just decided to stay there, instead of going back and forth. We just stayed put. And we haven't moved since 2005."

After a while, Cristina said she had to adapt the foods to her customers' tastes and learn how to make Central American foods. Her clients asked her, "Why don't you sell (Honduran) *baleadas*?" And she would ask, "Well, how do you make them?" She said her own customers provided her with recipes, and she practiced making them at home. "When I saw they were coming out good, I would sell them, the *baleadas*, *pupusas*, things like that. And they liked how I made them," she said with laughter, "even though I am not from Central America."

Cristina continued selling the intra-ethnic medley of Mexican and Central American

foods on foot until the police started putting pressure on her for selling food without a license.

She said:

And then, thank God, my brother came and he said that we should buy a *lonchera*...So, it worked out better because we decided to buy the truck and get all the appropriate licensing. And now we have over 200 hundred people that come each day, most are Latinos. But whites, blacks, come too, and like the food. It started out with me, my husband, my brother, and my sister-in-law and now we have hired these Honduran women to work in the truck. But if it continues to work out, we will get the other truck fixed and open up another truck.”

Cristina and her family’s story is one example of the many transnational narratives that stem from the waves of Latin American migrant workers that came to New Orleans and surrounding areas immediately after Katrina. Taqueria Falcon is an illustration of the ethnic food establishments that have inevitably followed these people to the Crescent City. From *baleadas* and *pupusas* to quesadillas and burritos, these Latin American foods and their cross-border offshoots contribute to the ways in which globalization shapes both the food culture and the identity of these new immigrants in the United States. Some of these foods and restaurants cater to Latino consumers providing more traditional dishes, language access, and safe havens for the new immigrants. Other foods and restaurants indulge the dominant society by adopting *kitsch* décor and standardized menus to appeal to the presumed cheese soaked, sour cream dolloped palates of mainstream consumers.

As these global flavors continue to evolve, Latin American foods and restaurants play a vital role to illuminate the complexities and vulnerabilities hidden within this migrant worker population. This research takes a more nuanced approach examining the transnational function of ethnic food in helping to expose these complexities which include the diversity within pan-ethnic labels, glimpses into the transient lives of food vendors and migrant workers, and how culture is simultaneously produced by both dominant society and migrant workers. Framed

through the standardizations of food and generalizations of people, this research examines the shifting ingredients of migrant identities and the ethnic food cultures carried with them as they cross the border, particularly focusing on the post-Katrina day laborer population in New Orleans.

As these workers enter the United States they instantly become “Latinos.” At the same time, this research argues that their food also takes on a new meaning to fit into the expectations of the dominant society. During the transnational journeys into the United States, traditional dishes like Salvadoran *pupusas* are left out of menus making room for more familiar *chimichangas*. Northern Mexican *pozole* is disregarded and replaced by cheese soaked *chili con carne*. Oftentimes, a taco is served with a hard shell. And, a burrito is drowned in sour cream. As these traditional foods give into these sometimes tasty standardizations, the cultural richness of the Latin American immigrant, too, is standardized, as pan-ethnic labels are applied. These complexities are thereby overshadowed by the use of categorical homogenizations and projected expectations as created by the dominant society (Gutierrez 1996; Rodriguez 1998; Massey et al 2010; Habel-Pallán, et al, 2002).

Similarly, as they cross the border into the United States, a group of Guatemalan women speaking *Quiche* become Hispanics. Nicaraguan youth playing recreational soccer become Latinos. Day laborers waiting for temporary employment in front of Home Depot become “illegals.” It is the power structures of and diversity within these standardizations and generalizations that this study attempts to uncover.

To narrow the scope of this research, I focus on the post-Katrina New Orleans mass influx of Latin American migrant workers that arrived between 2005 and 2011. During this time, day laborers arrived in the Crescent City from all over the United States and Latin America

in order to contribute to the cleanup and reconstruction of New Orleans after significant damage caused by Katrina (Gorman 2010; Fussell 2008; Drever 2008). A June 2011 report in the *Times Picayune* states that while New Orleans lost 29 percent of its population since the disaster in 2005, the Latin American population increased from 3 to 5 percent according to census reports taken in 2000 and 2010, respectively. Further, neighboring Jefferson Parish experienced an increase from 7 to 12 percent increase in this population, while the overall population decreased by 5 percent (Sparacello, et al, 2011).

With this influx exists a constant conflict in society desiring these migrant workers for their cheap labor and their vote; yet we reject them, claiming they are a tax burden; we want them for their rich culture—food, music, language; yet, we do not want them because they are different. By examining Central American and Mexican workers that arrived in post-Katrina New Orleans this research develops a broad framework around the overarching immigration debate while using foodways to attempt to contextualize the ambiguous and multilayered “migrant experience.”

As these ethnic groups enter the United States and embrace these generalized and constructed pan-ethnic identities, society assumes that these groups are monolithic, intrinsically united in solidarity, and are “destined to coalesce into a self-conscious, pan-ethnic political force that cuts across class lines” (Gutierrez 1996: 18). Oftentimes, society fails to realize that polarizations exist within these groups whose only commonality may be language, which even varies throughout geographic regions. Further, hierarchies that undermine the pan-ethnic identities may even go unobserved because of putative assumptions of solidarity and homogeneity (Oboler 1995; Hamilton and Chincilla 2001; Gill 2010).

A significant amount of research has been dedicated to the issue of Latino immigration as

well as to food, identity, and the politics of consumption. Sylvia Ferrero's statement, "the consumption of Mexican food in Mexican restaurants unveils a dual life of Mexican food: standardized food for Anglos, and specialties for Mexican-Americans and Mexicans" (2002: 214) points to these dietary dichotomies of food and the Mexican-American community. She exposes the ways in which the dominant society's tastes create a demand for this standardized cuisine and overlook the actual recipes of Mexican-Americans.

Likewise, in comparing the South Asian curry phenomenon in Great Britain, Elizabeth Buettner states, "Not only are restaurants in Britain labeled as 'Indian' mainly run and staffed by Bangladeshis and Pakistanis; their dishes normally differ markedly from what is consumed in the subcontinent and, for that matter, by most people of South Asian origin in Britain" (2008: 869). Similar to the ways in which Bangladeshi and Pakistani identities are masked behind the "Indian" identity, Mexican, Honduran, El Salvadoran, and other Central American cuisines are veiled behind putative Mexican identities and dishes and Tex Mex combination plates (Pilcher 2001; Bost 2003).

In regards to the pan-Latino diversity, scholars (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Gill 2010; Gutierrez 1996) reference the intra-ethnic diversities within these pan-Latino categories. Using over twenty years of field work and focusing primarily on Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles, Hamilton and Chinchilla (2001) posit, "the relations between Mexican Americans and recent Central American arrivals were and continue to be complex: sometimes friendly and cooperative, sometimes contentious. The character of the relations is shaped by historical divisions between Mexico and the Central American countries, the timing of immigration, and the distinct experiences Mexicans and Central Americans brought with them" (2001: 56).

In examining the recent surge of Latin American migrants in North Carolina, Gill (2010)

references the ways in which Latin Americans with indigenous roots are even further marginalized, especially within this concept of a pan-Latino identity. She provides an example of a woman named Elena who faces “double discrimination of being an indigenous person *and* a Latino immigrant” in the United States (2010: 120).

In New Orleans, Drever reports that her survey of 64 post-Katrina migrant workers suggests “that the nationality composition of recent new arrivals is remarkably diverse” including immigrants from Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico (2008: 293). While these are only a few examples regarding the complexities within the pan-Latino identity, they provide concrete samples of the diversities and tensions engendered by these hidden intra-ethnic hierarchies that can undermine the presumed solidarity of pan-ethnic identities.

As these past studies provide significant background and conceptualization of the role of food and immigration, there remains a dearth in research devoted to the ways in which food contributes to the construction of this pan-Latino identity. Only a few studies are committed to the specific significance of these food establishments for the Latin American migrant community. Sylvia Ferrero considers the dualities of Mexican restaurants and she even acknowledges the significance of these establishments for the Mexican immigrant; however, her research is focused solely on the Mexican-American population. Similarly, editors Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell provide a collection of critical essays and commentaries regarding ethnic foodways and food consumption; however, their research is outdated and also fails to address the diversities within the pan-Latino identity.

In response to Gutierrez’s claim that “making sense of this complexity (the Latino collective identity) will be one of the major challenges facing scholars of Latinos—and socially

and politically aware people both in the United States and Latin America” (1996: 18), this ethnographic research examines this complexity through participant observation, content analysis, and semi-structured interviews with day laborers, restaurant owners and staff. Further, by using food as just one of the many markers of this cultural heterogeneity, this research exposes and attempts to better understand the ways in which this newer Latin American population reacts or is “allowed to react” (Gutierrez 1996: 18) to the use of these standardizations and generalizations as these migrant workers negotiate their shifting identities and cultures.

This study on the contribution of food to the creation of the pan-Latino identity is significant for several reasons. First, this study can benefit other scholars in that it can help illuminate the sometimes difficult complexity of these subpopulations and provide a more critical look at the semantics behind these pan-ethnic terms. Second, exposing and better understanding the relationship between dominant society and the migrant workers can lead to ways in which these groups can positively navigate the use of generalizations and standardizations while simultaneously maintaining their cultural diversity.

Third, this research is significant in that it can expose mainstream society to the magnitude of hardships endured by the migrant workers by creating a more holistic understanding of the broader issues and contradictions that often go neglected when considering a generic “migrant experience.” Fourth, this study can help shape a greater understanding of the ethnic “other” in order to show that while dominant society enjoys their margaritas, fajitas, chips and salsa, hidden behind the colorful wall murals and the birthday sombreros exists a disenfranchised and demonized population. By using food as the medium, this study takes a unique approach at analyzing the power structures surrounding these subpopulations both

externally—the dominant society and the newly arrived Latin American immigrant—and internally—the dynamics within this vast migrant community.

II. IMMIGRATION, FOOD, AND CITIZENSHIP IN A GLOBAL WORLD

Past efforts to theorize the phenomena of ethnic identity, integration, and the transnational processes of people across borders have been shortsighted in attempting to explain and understand an extremely complex migrant experience. Melting pots, multiculturalism, salad bowls, and straight-line assimilation versus segmented assimilation are each simplified theoretical paradigms that attempt to grasp how immigrants and their ethnic cultures integrate into dominant society. Theories of mixing in seamlessly, as in the concept of the melting pot, are almost tautological in depicting the history of United States immigration and have been picked apart by scholars (Gutierrez 1999; Massey et al: 2010).

Likewise other clichés have surfaced depicting a more multicultural perception of immigration through the metaphor of the salad bowl or jambalaya. Multiculturalism argues the new community does not necessarily integrate seamlessly into society, rather they maintain their own culture and ways of life while coexisting within the other groups in the United States. Regardless, the evolving ingredients, both figurative and literal, do play a major role in attempting to define the “migrant experience” and create the ambiguous character of “American” identity.

Over time other models have developed which attempt to depict this ethnic transformation. Straight-line versus segmented assimilation has been a common comparison juxtaposing both generational and ethnic differences between immigrant groups. Putative model minority theories emerge claiming that certain groups are more inclined or capable to adhere to the straight-line approach of assimilation—learning English, adopting norms, values, and behaviors that are seemingly more congruent to that of the dominant society. Meanwhile, the

segmented assimilation model suggests that obstacles and structural barriers impede an ethnic group's ability to assimilate in to the dominant society. These barriers could include race, class, gender, language, access to education, and employment opportunities (Gutierrez 1996).

While these models do entail some truths, they fail to embrace the full complexity of driving migration forces and fail to address the structures that play a role in integration *and* acceptance in society. Each brings a valuable perspective on migration, ethnic identity, and integration; however, a much larger and more complex framework is necessary to fully contextualize the history, contingencies, and the intersections of multiple social factors that affect both the dominant society and the new ethnic group.

As flows of people cross borders they take on a new identity. As foodways make these transnational journeys, they adjust with ingredients, tastes, and recipes. Cities, too, must cope as they are already forced to restructure in a post-industrial and increasingly neoliberal environment. The social fabric of these cities must also adjust to make way for an emerging class of service workers (Sassen 2006; Hetzler et al, 2007). In examining the role of immigrants in this global restructuring in post-Katrina New Orleans, Hetzler et al, claim, "The growth of day labor meets the needs of employers in a global economy heavily dependent on service work" (2007:2).

Roles filled by these migrants include domestic workers, day laborers, child and elder care workers, and "low-level and behind-the-scenes positions in the hospitality industries associated with...hotels, restaurants, entertainment venues, and retail outlets" (2007: 2). These service worker industries are quickly replacing manufacturing jobs that have historically come with good benefits. However, service worker roles, which are increasingly filled by migrant workers, are highly under regulated, provided with few legal protections, receive low pay, and

the workers were treated as disposable (Sassen 2006; Hetzler et al, 2007; Browne et al, 2006). While this research focuses solely on the day laborer population, these harsh conditions for migrant workers are shared in this urban migrant experience that is taking place in New Orleans.

To contribute to a more holistic framework, Appadurai brings an anthropological lens to understand the complexity of this phenomena by arguing that “the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (2003: 31). Within this broader context, Gabaccia links food into the transforming ethnic identity in the global world by positing, “To understand changing American identities, we must explore also the symbolic power of food to reflect cultural or social affinities in moments of change or transformation” (1998: 9). In order to grasp these overlapping models, this research creates a more comprehensive framework to explore Appadurai’s concept of global *scapes* in order to examine the multiple power structures involved in creating an ethnic identity and to address the evolving concept of cultural citizenship in the United States.

Appadurai examines the concept of “constructed ethnicities” (2003: 27) by exploring the declining role of the nation state in an increasingly globalized world. He sees the lessened role of the nation states due to advanced technologies and neoliberal practices, but focuses on the importance of reestablishing oneself in the new global order. Appadurai (2003) refers to deterritorialization as how things are disconnected and moved throughout space and time, which in this research would apply to the deterritorialization of Latin American immigrants and their foodways.

Further, Appadurai uses Benedict Andersons’ concept of “imagined communities,” to examine the social construct of what he deems as “imagined worlds” created and defined by the

dominant society. Appadarai uses five *scapes* (2003: 31) to examine the fluidity between the flows of people, information, and commodities as they migrate from one imagined community to another. According to Appadurai, these *scapes* help to foster the integration of culture during these transnational processes and to demonstrate the difficulties that arise when the dominant society attempts to apply taxonomic control over polythetic groups (2003: 40,44). These five types of “imagined” *scapes* include *ethnoscapes* (people), *mediascapes* (images and information), *technoscapes* (technology), *financescapes* (money), and *ideoscapes* (values, ethics, and morals of the state) (2003: 31).

Adding to these five *scapes*, multiple scholars have introduced the concept of *foodscapes* (Ferrero 2002; Ruiz 2008; Pollock 1992). This concept is used throughout this research to explain the flows of foods that emerge as Latin American immigrants make their transnational journeys across borders. Ferrero defines *foodscapes* as she explores Mexican food consumption in Los Angeles as "an analysis that deals with transnational food practices" in which “the process of consumption of ethnic food in itself is conceived as a device to reconstitute identity and enact strategies where subordinated people engage in critical thinking and change the condition of their own existence” (2002: 194, 196). In effect, this research focuses on the ways in which evolving *foodscapes* contribute to the shifting concepts of modernity and the (re)construction of identity in a global world.

Analyzing the power structures found within the concept of *foodscapes* further supports the complexity within the concept of Appadurai’s constructed ethnicities. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong uses a Foucauldian approach to demonstrate the ways in which the dominant society and the diverse migrant community each contribute to the construction of migrant identity. She defines cultural citizenship as the “cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often

ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory” (1996: 738). Through power structures and the process of “subject-ification” Ong examines the difficulties that immigrants face in seeking not only citizenship, but also acceptance in dominant society.

Ong argues that what dictates the conditions of construction are the intersections of race, class, and culture, which contribute to the ways in which minorities integrate into mainstream society. Ong compares the distinct experiences of two groups of Asian Americans—Cambodian refugees and affluent Chinese immigrants—to exhibit the ways in which cultural citizenship is a “dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (1996: 738). Likewise for Latin American migrants in the United States, they are constantly being defined and defining themselves within these similar structures.

Zukin’s example of Latin American food vendors in Brooklyn provides an example of this dual process. As the food vendors of different nationalities continue to adopt the typical dishes of one another’s country, they embrace both their shifting roles in society and the shifting demands of consumers. Likewise, Zukin tells the story of Rosa, a food vendor from Mexico who has had to tweak her recipes to accommodate the changing clientele. She states, “Since we work with different people, including more white people, we add different things. We add more vegetables. Here, people like to eat more vegetables than us. So there are small things like that we change,” (2010: 178).

To further demonstrate this process of self-making and being-made, Ong addresses the categorical homogenization imposed by the dominant society through the use of the pan-ethnic term, Asian American. She claims that these blanket terms fail to encapsulate the complexity of these Asian immigrant populations, and ultimately theorizes that the homogeneity of these

communities must be acknowledged by the dominant society, but until it is, these migrant communities can hope for the “reconfiguration of citizenship” in the “new global era” (1996: 751).

To convey the dangers of these pan-ethnic categories, Chavez explores the “Latino threat narrative” which demonstrates how society generalizes and demonizes Latin American immigrants as lawbreakers and as an economic drain. Further, the “Latino threat narrative” suggests that Latinos are “unable or unwilling to integrate into United States society, preferring to remain linguistically and socially isolated” (2008: 16). Chavez examines this perpetuated homogeneity of this population by using Foucault’s “spectacles” (2008: 144) stating that undocumented Latinos are “objectified,” thereby dehumanized by a continued media “spectacle.” Chavez defines “spectacles” as “productive acts that construct knowledge about subjects in our world” (2008: 5). He posits that these “spectacles” lump Latin American immigrants together and “transform immigrants’ lives into virtual lives which are typically devoid of the nuances and subtleties of real lived lives” (2008: 5-6). The end result, according to Chavez, makes it easier to misunderstand and to lack empathy towards these groups of people. Thus, these misunderstandings can further limit the integration of these immigrants into society.

In a similar way in which the dominant society has created this sense of a generalized, pan-ethnic identity for diverse migrant groups in the United States, Bourdieu uses a theoretical framework based on empirical research done in France to explore the relationship between class and consumption. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, defined as the ways in which society is affected and guided by a set of social structures in which we live, can be applied to the ways in which the dominant society creates the norms—pan-ethnic identities, food preferences—for the rest of society (Jenkins 1992). Through his research, Bourdieu demonstrates that the desires of the

higher classes dominate the tastes—food, music, clothing, etc.—of the lower classes because they have more cultural and economic capital. As the dominant upper class determines the tastes of society through their privilege and power, class distinctions are reinforced in daily life.

Bourdieu states that power defines aesthetic values in that “the working-class ‘aesthetic’ is a dominated ‘aesthetic’, which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics,” (1984: 41). Similar to the ways in which the dominant society assumes taxonomic control over minority populations, in this case the Latin American immigrants, Bourdieu argues that the putative refined tastes of the dominant classes in France help define the tastes of the lower classes. However, this does not necessarily suggest that society is completely controlled by these dominant classes; rather *habitus* produces reasonable actions and behaviors which fall within daily life and people are paradoxically autonomous once within this structure (Jenkins 1992: 39). This reflects upon Ong’s idea of being self-made and being-made, and the ways in which these migrants are able to define themselves within these created (imagined) parameters of society.

Appadurai’s concept of *scapes* provides the (imagined) setting to link Ong and Chavez’s questions on pan-ethnic identities and cultural citizenship to Bourdieu’s ideas of preconceived tastes of the dominant society. By portraying ethnic and minority groups as broad and homogeneous categories, the dominant society fails to see the complexity within the flows of people and culture (Ong; Appadurai 2003; Chavez 2008) and, in turn, determines the tastes of society (Bourdieu 1998). Moreover, this holistic context must include the “uncertain interplay” (Appadurai 2003: 40) between the various landscapes that emerge in an increasingly global era, thus demonstrating that simplified theories of migration and integration are no longer adequate to cover the comprehensive framework needed to address the power structures applied by the

dominant society onto minority groups.

Likewise, Chavez (2008) argues that archaic immigration policies must catch up and to adequately and humanely adhere to these shifting economies and constant flows of people. Chavez questions what it really means to be a citizen in a time when the concept of a nation state and borders are disappearing. He states that citizenship is more than just immigration status; it is about participating in one's community, national identity, rights, and political action (2008: 62-66). He concludes that society (like recipes and identities) is alive and continually changing. We live in the contemporary neoliberal context, where borders disappear, deregulation regulates, and profit trumps people. But, Chavez and this research argue that the flows of people are as much a part of the neoliberal context as the flow of monies and the flow goods. Therefore, as Chavez posits, what it means to be a citizen needs to be redefined and the role of these migrant groups within this context must be re-examined through a more holistic lens. New policies need to be inclusive, facilitating the natural immersion of migrants into society, rather than fueling contradictory politics and ideologies that thwart any effort of integration and perpetuate the fabricated "Latino Threat Narrative" (2008).

By reflecting upon the concepts identified within the literature review, I was able to produce the following research question: How does food contribute to the creation of a pan-Latino identity? From this general question, I derived the following subquestions: How do these pan-Latino identities applied by dominant society serve as categorical homogenizations? How do foodways contribute to the vulnerabilities of this migrant worker population? What are ways in which Latin American foodscapes in post-Katrina New Orleans represent the diverse origins of migrant workers? Can the dominant society become more open to and understanding of ethnic culture simply by tasting the "Other"?

III. CRESCENT CITY SETTING

Immediately following Katrina, the federal government suspended labor laws which facilitated the entrance of migrant workers to help clean up and rebuild the city. First, the Davis-Bacon Act was suspended and contractors were not required to pay employees a local prevailing wage. Second, the Department of Homeland Security eased rules that no longer ordered contractors to check the documentation status of employees. Lifting these laws, albeit temporary, led to the influx of these migrant workers and lax labor law enforcement, which led to the exploitation of these workers throughout the city (Gorman 2010). Sadly, incidents of contractors calling Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to report migrant workers instead of paying them were widespread and even still occur (Gonzales 2011). Documented accounts of day laborers forced to work in harsh conditions without adequate gear were also common. Some of these migrant workers still remain today, while others continue to make the journey into New Orleans and surrounding cities. These workers become a vulnerable population as they are branded as illegals, tax burdens, and are exploited for their work. Thusly, they are forced to live furtive lives due to mounting pressures from authorities and increased incidents of racial profiling from law enforcement (Gonzales 2011).

Before the 2010 Senate elections, Louisiana Republican Senator David Vitter authorized a controversial ad condemning his Democrat opponent, Charlie Melancon, for aiding “illegals.” The ad claimed, “Melancon voted to make it easier for illegals to get taxpayer funded benefits and actual welfare checks. Melancon even voted against allowing police to arrest illegals. Thanks to Charlie Melancon, it’s no wonder illegals keep coming and coming” (Kleefeld 2010). Despite the grueling hours, low pay, and dangerous working conditions these migrant workers endured to help rebuild the city, Senator Vitter, along with other politicians and leaders, show

little respect for these workers (Browne et al, 2006).

Hetzler et al, argues these same politicians and policy makers have helped foster this neoliberal economic climate which is dependent on this service-based economy and fuels off the disposability of this marginalized, unprotected migrant labor force (De Genova 2001; Sassen 2006; Hetzler et al, 2007). Thus, this disposability and general disregard of these workers by policy makers exposes and perpetuates the vulnerability of this migrant community (Browne et al, 2006). Further, according to De Genova (2001), by propagating anti-immigrant rhetoric and the usage of essentialized words like “illegals” and “aliens,” this migrant forces is falsely lumped with a misrepresentative label. It fails to take into account the actual status of workers by profiling them into one homogenized and demonized categorization. Further, these generic labels fail to capture the motivations of migrants¹ to come to the United States and the history of United States’ policies that have engendered the arrival of these migrant workers² (Gutierrez 1996; Gill 2010; De Genova 2001).

Gill establishes that the complexity of immigration is far beyond a migrant quest for the dubious American dream rather she posits, “Immigration is motivated by conditions in home countries as well as by labor demands in the United States” (2010: 106). Further, according to Drever, the post-Katrina migrant communities in New Orleans are not all “illegals.” According to her findings, 54 percent of her sampling of post-Katrina migrant workers was found to be undocumented (Drever 2008). While the documentation status of these migrant workers is outside the scope of this research, it is imperative to expose the erroneous illegal versus legal binary used by anti-immigrant politicians and media to condemn and pigeonhole this migrant labor force (De Genova 2002; Chavez 2008; Davila 2008). While the usage of terms like “illegal” is far more pejorative than the use of *Hispanic* or *Latino*, this research maintains that

there are implications in the systematic use of any of these pan-ethnic terms within this diverse community (De Genova 2008; Chávez 2008).

The vast majority of reconstruction workers moved to the Greater New Orleans area towards the end of 2005 to help clean up and rebuild post-Katrina. According to the report, *And Injustice for All*:

Since Katrina, by some estimates, 30,000 to 100,000 migrant workers have arrived in the Gulf Coast region to work in the reconstruction zones...The migrant worker population is diverse, not only in terms of race and national origin, but also immigration status, ranging from United States born and naturalized citizens to undocumented workers and, more recently, guest workers on H-2 visas issued for temporary workers (2006: 8).

As the New Orleans Worker Justice Coalition argues in their report *And Injustice for All*, exploitation and vulnerability are, sadly, other factors beyond language that link the complex individuals that make up this migrant population (2006: 8).

As anti-immigrant sentiments spread throughout the United States, many places like Alabama and Georgia have followed in the footsteps of Arizona's draconian SB1070 immigration bill, which legalizes racial profiling, criminalizes people who transport undocumented individuals, and (in Alabama) forbids undocumented individuals from accessing public utilities such as water and education (Fausset 2011). Further, Gill outlines the current federal policies that have been implemented such as 287G and Secure Communities program which each rely on a partnership between local and state police officers and ICE agents to target undocumented individuals and have led to record numbers of deportations (Gill 2010). Establishing these past histories and current immigration policies are essential to contextualize the polarized political environment these migrant workers face.

Locally, a discriminatory policy directly addressing these research participants occurred

in 2007 when authorities in Jefferson Parish implemented a law prohibiting taco trucks in the area. Scholars (Plummer 2008; Ruiz 2008) claim this policy fueled racial, anti-immigrant tensions. Despite initial claims that the trucks were unsanitary, the health department came to the defense of the taco trucks claiming they found no problems with the sanitation (Bustillo 2007). Local officials in the Jefferson Parish claimed the trucks to be a zoning violation in their attempt to regulate and strengthen zoning standards (2007).

Instead, Ruiz posits that the policy is clearly discriminatory and contains “thick racial overtones” (2008: 8-9). Furthermore, in reference to Latinos and their business endeavors,



Fig. 2. View of Taqueria Falcon with Superdome in the Background

Plummer states that the local Jefferson Parish government officials define Latinos as “nuisances rather than entrepreneurs, and exclude them from the freewheeling capitalism recommended by purveyors of the American Dream” (Plummer, 2008: 24). This food truck debate is only a symptom of the larger challenge of how New

Orleans will embrace Latinos into its urban social fabric to help replenish the post-Katrina population loss.

IV. RESEARCH PROCESS

The Researcher’s Role

Because this qualitative design entails interpretative research, it is essential that the researcher employ the use of reflexivity in that the research design to ensure that the research design recognizes the investigator’s past experiences, including personal biases, culture, values, socioeconomic status, etc. Miller and Deutsch define reflexivity as “the practice of

acknowledging what the researcher brings to the study and how that will affect her understanding of meanings constructed during the project is a crucial element of the modern ethnography” (Miller et al, 2009: 157). Acknowledging the reality that these factors could influence the study is imperative to the entire process (Creswell 2009: 177). While my citizenship status alone, along with other social factors—access to education, health services, transportation, social capital, etc.—distinguishes me from a large portion of the participants involved in my research, I bring valuable knowledge from twelve years of experience working with various Latin American immigrant communities.

In particular, I worked for three years as an employee and volunteer with the Latino immigrant community in Kentucky primarily helping these communities to access local resources, better understand cultural norms, and attempt to ameliorate disparities between Latinos and non-Latinos. During this time and, perhaps, most relevant to this research, I helped develop and organize two local Latino Food Festivals, which celebrated the diverse Latin American immigrant population in Shelbyville, Kentucky. Prior to that, I served four years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay. During this service, I not only further developed my Spanish speaking skills, but also acquired a cultural sensitivity, which taught me the importance of working within cultures, proper field observation strategies, as well as other methods of participatory community analysis. My most recent and relevant work with Latin American communities in New Orleans is included in the “Steps to Gain Entry” section and examines methods I have used to access both local ethnic restaurants and the migrant worker population in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Research Design

This ethnographic research design maintains a social constructivist worldview approach

based on understanding the phenomenon of eating and identity in the transnational journeys of Latin American immigrants in New Orleans (Creswell 2009: 8). According to Creswell, ethnography is “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time” (2009: 13). By focusing on the specific contexts in which people negotiate the social world and by observing the everyday nuances in both the migrant day labor settings and the Latin American restaurant settings, I used ethnographic methods to explore the sociocultural role of food and foodways in contributing to the construction of a pan-Latino identity. Since November 2010, I have combined over 400 hours of anthropological fieldwork with approximately 150 samples of material culture (reviews, signs, menus, décor) in order to foster a better understanding of the ways in which both the food culture and ethnic identity of new Latino migrant workers is co-constructed and reconstructed during their experience in post-Katrina New Orleans (McMillan 1997).

Methodology

Following this ethnographic research design, I collected data through participant observation and semi-structured interviews in both the migrant day laborer setting and the food establishment setting. This part of my research relied on both deductive and inductive reasoning in that codes were established both prior to and during the analysis of data. *In vivo* codes such as “*antojo*” (whim) and *catracho* (slang term used for a Honduran) were extracted during the analysis. Further, during the research analysis emergent concepts and patterns were identified and developed to better understand the complexity of this migrant population and their foodways. To further complement this research, data was collected via content analysis of material culture. The content analysis portion of this research was based on deductive reasoning in that preset criteria were identified to analyze these cultural materials (Emerson et al, 2011).

Participant Observation

This anthropological research adhered to the tenets of Boas and his successors by using participant observation as one of three research methodologies (Sanday 1979; DeWalt 2001). As described by Sanday, “Boas established the importance of a lengthy residence and of understanding reality from the native’s point of view” (1979: 527). Likewise, in distinguishing between the various components of qualitative research, DeWalt and DeWalt define participant observation as “a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (2001: 1). This method has enabled me to better interpret the day-to-day perspectives of these participants in their natural setting. I spent one year observing in the field in the day laborer setting. Participant observation was also conducted during the frequent visits dining at the restaurants. During this fieldwork, events, interactions, and reactions were recorded daily in a notebook with clarification of local meanings and their significance clarified by gatekeeper, Denis Soriano.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To arrive at a better sense of the power structures within these food establishments and to understand perspectives of immigrants regarding the pan-Latino identity, semi-structured interviews were used which follow Creswell’s interview protocol and procedural recommendations for collecting data in the field. I conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with selected participants, which involved questions designed to extract further viewpoints from the participants (Creswell 2009: 18). This study was emergent in the sense that during the process steps were modified and research questions shifted as fieldwork and analysis transpired.

Much of the fieldwork directly involving the restaurants followed a similar structure used by authors Turgeon and Pastinelli. In investigating ethnic foodways in Quebec, the authors state that their research goal “is not holistic representation, nor a portrayal of the world system as a totality, but, rather, the mapping of site[s] where the mechanics of globalization are expressed in the cultural practices of everyday life” (2002: 252). Adhering to this idea, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Latin American migrant workers and the cooks and owners of Latin American food establishments.

Content Analysis

The third methodology used in this research is content analysis. Bernard defines content analysis as unobtrusive observations that “reduce the information in a text [artifact] to a series of variables that can then be examined for correlations” (1995: 339). Further, Bernard posits that content analysis is ideal for anthropologists because it is “a blend of qualitative and quantitative, positivistic and interpretive methods” (339). By observing material culture collected from the restaurants identified, I described, analyzed, and made inferences regarding the restaurants.

Data Collected

Restaurants

In the restaurant setting, ten restaurants were identified in Gretna and New Orleans. They include food trucks and restaurants scattered throughout ethnic pockets in the New Orleans area. To get the restaurant sample, I asked the migrant workers to identify their favorite restaurants and food trucks. It is these Latin American migrant participants who have helped me to access these and discover other establishments hidden throughout New Orleans. The restaurants were selected in Gretna and New Orleans because the two cities are where the four Day Laborer Centers are organized and located. Further, only restaurants and food trucks were selected that

had arrived post-Katrina. The following table includes the list of restaurants identified for the research:

Fig. 3. List of Food Establishments

Restaurant	City	Year Opened	Owner's Country of Origin	Type of Establishment	# Of Visits
Telamar	New Orleans	2006	Honduras	Brick and Mortar	5
Taqueria Falcon	New Orleans	2006	Mexico	Food Truck	4
Los Paisanos	New Orleans	2007	Mexican	Brick and Mortar	4
Taqueria D.F.	New Orleans	2007	El Salvador and Mexico	Food Truck	3
Taqueria D.F.	New Orleans	2008	Mexico	Food Truck	15+
La Coyota	New Orleans (Lower 9 th)	-	Honduras	Food Truck	2
Taqueria Sanchez	Gretna	2007	Mexican and Salvadoran	Brick and Mortar	4
Ideal	New Orleans	-	-	Brick and Mortar	5
Las Chicas Sexy Muy Buenos Tacos	Mobile (New Orleans Area)	-	Unknown	Food Truck	1
Los Portales	New Orleans (7 th Ward)	2011	Mexican	Brick and Mortar	3
Norma's Bakery	New Orleans	2011	Honduran	Brick and Mortar	4
Taqueria Guerrero	New Orleans	2007	Mexican	Brick and Mortar	3

My approach to participant observation was to gather field notes first by observing the restaurants as an outsider via initial visits to each of these restaurants identified. I visited the brick and mortar restaurants each at least three times and the visits to food trucks varied. On most occasions, during the first visit, I let my fieldwork occur organically, asking subtle questions to the staff and taking note of ambience and clientele. During the second visit, I presented myself and established my research goals with the staff and/or owner. In this visit I

attempted to move “into the setting” and observe as an insider (Creswell 2010: 182). The third and, sometimes, fourth visits, I arrived more comfortably and was able to either get a recorded interview on the spot with the owner³ or I was able to set up an interview outside of the restaurant or food truck with the owner or cook. This approach allowed me to get multiple opportunities to observe the clientele and the ambience, facilitated contact and rapport with owners and staff, and fostered a few complimentary appetizers and beverages.

By interviewing the Latin American owners and staff of the ten restaurants in Gretna and New Orleans, I discovered the nationality of the owners, the year they opened, reasons for establishing in their current location, their perspectives on clientele, information on their menu, and other questions that arose naturally during the process. All interviews were conducted in Spanish by the researcher.

During these multiple restaurant visits, I collected material data for my content analysis. Drawing from approximately 50 pieces of material culture (menus, signage, décor, murals, etc.) in these restaurants further complemented this research by including items from multiple sources. Photographs, printed copies, scanned copies of artifacts were collected. Further material culture was collected through online reviews of the ten identified restaurants. These reviews were printed out and collected for analysis. Overall, this material culture includes approximately 150 artifacts gathered from restaurants and collected via internet websites such as Yelp.com and UrbanSpoon.com.

Migrant Worker Setting

Within the migrant day laborer population, I have approximately 50 participant observation field notes. These observations were made while volunteering with the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ). A large portion of these participant observations



Fig. 4. Official Day Labor Center in Gretna

were taken during a trip to Arlington, VA for an immigration conference in May 2011. During this weeklong trip, I observed the restaurant eating patterns of ten Latin American day laborers.

Observations generally revolved around eating habits, notes taken from informal discussions during meals, actual food selection, and general attitude and behavior regarding restaurant choices. Most often these observations were made before, during, and after the eating process at restaurants, which ranged from Tex Mex restaurants and putative Mexican restaurants to more traditional Latin American restaurants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted within this migrant worker population affiliated with the NOWCRJ membership organization, Congress of Day Laborers. The sample size consists of nine male and two female participants between the ages of 26-65. The first sampling of interviews with migrant workers was conducted with the members of the Congress of Day Laborers during Wednesday meetings. This sample consists of a more diverse representation, which includes female migrant workers. The second sampling of interviews were conducted during Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning visits with the male-dominated migrant workers who work at Day Labor Centers located in three sites in New Orleans: Elysian Fields and Florida Avenues Claiborne and Martin Luther King Jr. Streets, and Carrolton Avenue and Toulouse Street, as well as one site in Gretna, on the corner of Westbank Expressway and Chilo Street.

The semi-structured interviews were purposeful and were stratified by country of origin (Central America and Mexico only) and date of arrival to New Orleans (post-Katrina). Data

received from these interviews completed a primary objective of this research, which is to gain access to the perspectives of the Latin American community regarding the use of pan-Latino identities in the United States.

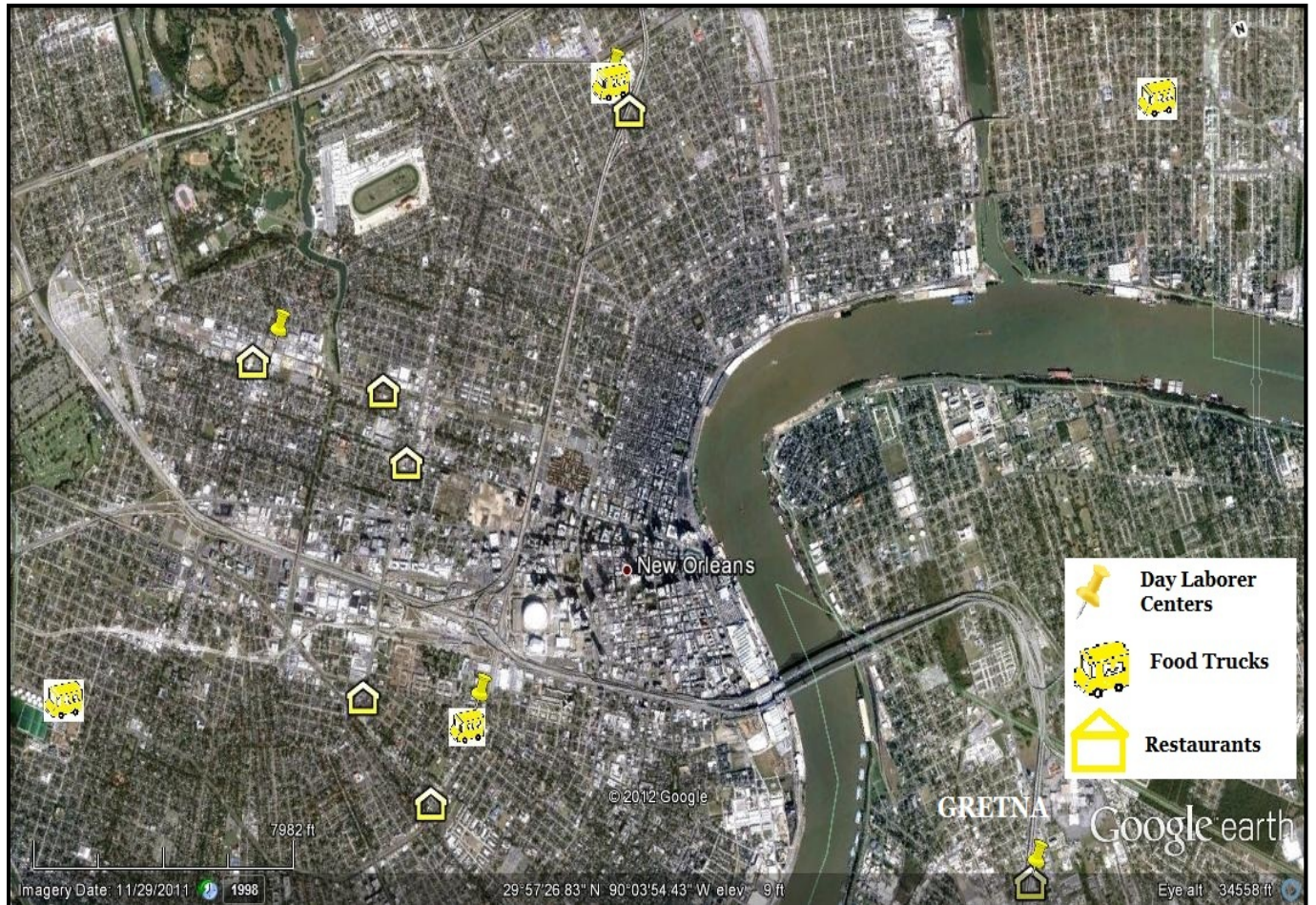


Fig. 5. Map of Food Establishments and Day Laborer Centers in Gretna and New Orleans

Steps to Gain Entry

My experiences working with the NOWCRJ since March 2011 have provided me access to acquire the local knowledge of the participants' situation as they attempt to establish themselves and build communities in New Orleans and Gretna. By volunteering with the NOWCRJ, particularly with the Congress of Day Laborers, I have developed working relationships with staff and migrant workers. The Congress of Day Laborers is a membership organization of reconstruction workers in Louisiana, which strives to maintain strong working

relations between the day laborers, local authorities, and society in general to help promote safe and healthy job conditions for these reconstruction workers. This site was chosen for study because it includes a diverse group of Latin American immigrants who have moved to help with reconstruction efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans. The study will not be disruptive during these visits because community organizer Dennis Soriano⁴ and I met regularly with these workers and the interviews will be conducted while they await their work.

From my perspective, this collaboration has fostered genuine relationships with these migrant workers and has allowed us to build trust and confidence with one another. Three to five days a week, I accompanied Soriano to meet with the day laborers at the various worker centers located in New Orleans on Carrolton, Elysian Fields, and Claiborne Avenues, and in the workers' center in Gretna. Workers congregate in the areas to wait for jobs from local contractors. Further, on Wednesday nights, I participated in weekly meetings with the members of the Congress of Day Laborers and occasionally with the Latina Women's Meetings on Friday evenings. I frequently consulted the staff at the Congress of Day Laborers, which includes Soriano and lead organizer, Jacinta Gonzalez, who essentially serve as the gatekeepers of this research project in that they provided access to this fieldwork, served as resources, and permitted the research conducted (Creswell 2009: 178).

As I mentioned earlier, in May 2011, I accompanied the group of eleven members of the Congress of Day Laborers to an immigration conference in Arlington, VA. During this five day journey, substantial fieldwork including participant observation was performed. Participating in this conference (and the long travel involved) provided optimal time to observe behavioral and consumption patterns of the members and further cultivate friendships. Perhaps most importantly, this interaction presented the opportunity to take an intimate look into the lives,

rituals, and culture of these individuals and provided the chance to hear the voices and stories behind their individual, transnational struggles.

While this work with the NOWCRJ is the most significant to this research, further fieldwork was conducted while volunteering with the Latino Farmer's Cooperative of Louisiana since November 2010 and Puentes since October 2010. These agencies provide multiple services to the Latin American communities of greater New Orleans. The Latino Farmer's Co-op is a membership based group that began in 2008 and teaches sustainable farming to and fosters local economic growth within the Latin American immigrant community in New Orleans. Meanwhile, Puentes is a community development non-profit organization that was established in 2007 to engender involvement and incorporation of the Latino community with post-Katrina city rebuilding efforts.

My work with these three agencies has fostered these strong relationships and enabled me to acquire local knowledge regarding the daily lives of the diverse spectrum of the Latin American population in New Orleans. Moreover, it has enabled me to study people *in* places, which Zussman argues is essential to qualitative research. These experiences have and will continue to enable me to better understand the struggles of these complex immigrant communities by being a part their everyday routines.

Moreover, during these experiences, I have been able to use the "centrality" of food as "enjoyable and enriching" (Buettner 2008: 866) to initiate dialogue during participant observation. Simply, because people enjoy talking about food and by using food to initiate conversation has opened up topics to much broader and sometimes more intimate conversations. Moreover, these respective experiences and the participants' eagerness to talk about food have given me insight on the multiple Latin American ethnic enclaves that are hidden throughout

greater New Orleans and Gretna. Further, their assistance has provided me with awareness of and better access to these oftentimes esoteric establishments.

Data Analysis Procedures

For participant observation, field notes from these observations were gathered in three notebooks. Collected within these field notes are the observations, dates, location, times, and, when relevant, participant descriptions, which were transcribed weekly. Once completed, I combed through this material to identify and label reoccurring concepts. Following Bernard's (1995) suggestion, on most occasions, I used numbers for coding. Once the codes were established, I identified patterns and extracted major themes.

For the semi-structured interviews, once all the data was collected, I organized and prepared the data for analysis. I translated the interviews into English and transcribed the recorded interviews. From this data, a general sense of the information collected was obtained, and given a preliminary interpretation of the overall ideas, patterns, tones, and meaning. From the detailed analysis, a numbered coding process was again used to organize and categorize the material into thematic segments.

For content analysis, I analyzed menus to see if they were printed in Spanish or English, or both; I also noted if there was a presence of foods from multiple countries are present on the menus, if there was a numbered menu (which would facilitate pronunciation of menu items), and to see if the restaurant offers predetermined "Americanized" dishes. Material culture in the forms of signage was also analyzed to examine language(s) used, messages conveyed, and ethnicities represented.

Internet restaurant reviews were analyzed to gauge the opinions of the authors regarding the specific restaurants. I interpreted the comments and the ethnicity of the reviewer was

determined in order to distinguish if the reviewer is non-Latino or Latino by looking at the roots of the name provided. The researcher recognizes potential fallacies that could arise from this analytic method due to consistencies and reliabilities of websites like Urbanspoon.com and Yelp.com. After this raw data was collected, coded, and transcribed, it was reanalyzed and systematically number coded. The results were interpreted and descriptions and themes were established.

Using the most descriptive wording from the material, *in vivo* codes were identified and designated labeling the specific categories that relate to each other. Codes were also alphabetized and data material belonging to the established categories were placed together to start the preliminary analysis. Recoding was done as necessary. After each collection of data was aptly coded, interrelating themes and descriptions were then extracted to appear as major findings with relevant quotes identified to support these major findings. The themes were examined to determine potential complex theme connections. Effective methods of representing themes and descriptions were then determined as deemed fit. Lastly, the data analysis makes data meaningful through comparisons of information from the literature with theories to determine if findings confirm past information or differ from it. New questions were raised by the data that had not been considered prior to analysis such as how does food contribute to the vulnerabilities of this migrant population?

Verification

Potential bias of the researcher is acknowledged. I recognize these biases inevitably influence my perspectives and understandings of the data collected. In order to mitigate some of these biases, validity and reliability measures were taken, which are addressed in the final section. The researcher's role has been previously established to show recognition of the ways

my past experiences and limitations shape the findings and interpretations (Creswell 2009: 190-201).

Validity

To ensure validity, I checked for the accuracy of the findings by taking the following steps. Multiple sources of data were collected in order to obtain a triangulation of data. Rich and thick description was used to illustrate the findings. This language developed the setting for the readers and provided a complete description of the findings to make them more realistic and possibly create shared experiences. Member checking strategy was then used to verify interpretations throughout the analysis process. The gatekeepers, Dennis Soriano and lead community organizer Jacinta Gonzalez, and I maintained ongoing dialogue to ensure the interpretation of the data analysis. Likewise, these gatekeepers were involved throughout the research—from the design to the analysis and interpretation—to ensure validity (Creswell 2010; Bernard 1995).

Reliability

To ensure the reliability of this research and its consistency, I took the following steps. Graduate student Eduardo Piqueiras and Andy Dahl were each consulted to review my questions regarding transcriptions, particularly focusing on the Spanish to English translations. To further ensure reliability, I constantly cross-checked my coding in order to ensure that uniform definitions and vocabulary are used throughout my research. At the same time, I recognize that my research is taking place in the context of an “ever-changing backdrop” and with a transient community of migrant workers and food establishment owners (Barbour 2001). While these changing contexts are a constant challenge to qualitative researchers, I made the best effort to maintain consistency throughout my research through the aforementioned practices.

Ethical Concerns

An inherent risk is involved in this research in that working with a vulnerable immigrant population in an anti-immigrant climate may make participants even more apprehensive to share personal information. To minimize risk, I did not collect sensitive data, especially regarding the documentation status of these participants. Further, my experience volunteering with these migrant workers helped mitigate potential stress and other challenges in that confidence and trust have been developed. Moreover, these semi-structured interviews with migrant workers were conducted in the presence of Soriano or Gonzalez who have been working extensively with this population. Lastly, at any point during the interview process participants were allowed to end the interview early. Approval for this research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board to further protect the rights of the participants.

V. ILLEGALS TO *CATRACHOS*: ACRIBED AND SELF-ASCRIBED LABELING

"It's kind of hard for me to order since I don't speak Spanish. I just keep my words simple so they understand what I want."

-Leena T. on Taqueria Sanchez⁵

"In my case, I speak the language *quiché*. This is a language of my grandparents and my parents. In the United States, I learned to speak Spanish, and I want to learn English too."

-Eusebia, Member of the Congress of Day Laborers

"Some of us are illegal, and some are not wanted,
Our work contract's out and we have to move on;
Six Hundred miles to that Mexican border,
They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves.

-Woody Guthrie, "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos"

From terrorists to aliens to a vibrant middle class, Latin American immigrants have been both pandered to and demonized as they emerge as the fastest growing minority in the United States. As these migrants continue to enter the United States, they are labeled with blanket terms like *Latino* and *Hispanic* despite complexities existing within these groups. These issues include language, gender, class, family values, race, country of origin, religion, reasons for migration, etc. Pan-ethnic terms, which even include more pejorative terms like "illegal" and "wetbacks,"

illuminate the obliviousness of the dominant society to the actual diversities that exist in these subgroups and contribute to misrepresentations by the media, politicians, and society in general. While words like *Latinidad*, *Latinismo*, *Hispanidad* are pan-ethnic terms used by scholars to label this phenomena, to remain consistent, this research considers the use of the term pan-Latino to be broadly defined as “a diverse and assorted group of ethnicities who trace their heritage to a variety of Latin American countries” (Kattari 2009: 108).

Anthropologist Arlene Davila has written multiple articles on the dangers of using such generalizations. She both condemns the “whitewashing” of the Latin Americans and is critical of the use of pan-Latino identities by the dominant society. Davila directly proposes that her usage of the term “Latino” in her book is “purposefully” used “to signify the ubiquitous use of this term by the media and the mainstream press” to show “how this dominant generic designation also contributes to the whitewashing of this group” (Davila 2008: 7). She is further critical of the perils of society’s incessant “strategic essentialism” (2008: 8) in her analysis of the diversity of Latinos, and she argues that society ignores or is unaware of these complexities, which further perpetuates broad, specious generalizations.

Sommers explores the creation of this Latino identity, using the term *Latinismo*. Through interviews and observations made while at cultural festivals in diverse San Francisco, Sommers explores the significance and evolution of this pan-Latino movement. Sommers begins by stating that the diverse identities within *Latinismo* have been understudied and, like Davila and Chavez, she examines the motivations behind inventing a unified, broad pan-Latino group. Throughout the article, Sommers develops this initial theory by focusing on the importance of clearly defining the diversities within the umbrella term, *Latinismo*; furthermore, she explores the

importance of redefining or better outlining the definitions of broad terms like “Latino” and “Hispanic” which she claims have been monopolized and adulterated by the dominant society.

Additionally, Sommers critiques the concept of a “unity in diversity” model (199: 33) by exploring the past attempts of defining Latin Americans under one identity. While Sommers recognizes that the Spanish language is frequently a primary unifying factor within this pan-Latino identity, she proposes that “the public fiesta” has “become a popular venue for enacting emergent *Latinismo* by allowing for the simultaneous display of cultural differences and similarities” (1991: 37). Likewise, Sommers looks at the challenges within this use of public displays—festivals, music, *Carnaval* celebrations—claiming that in San Francisco this “cultural symbolism was simply too generic to serve as a meaningful cultural umbrella for a heavily mestizo immigrant population already fraught with ethnic rivalries” (1991: 48). This concept of “ethnic rivalries” is one that is often overlooked by the dominant society, which tends to envision these subgroups melding together effortlessly.

In her research on the effects of globalization on the Red Hook neighborhood in Brooklyn, Zukin examines the establishment of Latin American food vendors that serve food during soccer games. In demonstrating the diversities of the Latin American migrants that frequent the restaurant, Zukin states that “each vendor represents a national culture, but the marketplace as a whole becomes Latino” (2010: 177). Zukin tells the story of Yolanda, a Salvadoran food vendor and her experience selling *pupusas*. She says, “The Mexicans didn’t know what a *pupusa* was: They were like, ‘What’s that?’ ...and we said, ‘It’s a *pupusa*.” Zukin continues on to state the shifting products these vendors began to sell. She posits, “Most customers bought food from vendors from their homeland. But unlike at home, they also bought food from vendors of other nationalities, and some vendors began to prepare and sell the foods of

other countries along with their own” (2010: 177). This example provided by Zukin demonstrates these shifting cultures along with the shifting tastes and ingredients that comprise this pan-Latino identity.

Similarly, Mayer explores the use of the pan-Latino identity by looking at the ways in which Argentine immigrants fit into the pan-Latino mold. Mayer argues that Argentines initially maintained an “exceptionalist” status within the United States because their ephemeral global economic prosperity distinguished them from other “Latinos.” However, Mayer argues, once they lost their economic status, they melded within the pan-Latino identity. Mayer states, “Not necessarily identified as ‘Latinos’ either by themselves or other Latinos, Argentinean Americans become Latinos through the governmentality of the state and the subjectification of other United States citizens, including Latinos” (2004: 119).

Like Davila, Mayer uses a critical tone towards the dominant society claiming that the use of the umbrella terms suggests “the transnational commodification of new diasporas as cheaper and more mobile labor forces frames Latinization in terms of the state” (2004: 121). Therefore, Mayer posits that embracing the pan-Latino identity is “less an essence or a choice but a requisite” (2004: 119) applied by dominant society. Further, similar to Sommers’ recommendation, Mayer encourages a “re-examination of the meaning of ‘Latino’ in the United States—a more extensive look at what some literary scholars metaphorically refer to as living in the ‘hyphen’ between identities” (2004: 120).

While broadening my thesis research to encompass the cuisine of Argentina and other South American countries is tempting, it is in the best interest of both the reader and the writer to maintain a narrower scope within the gastronomical parameters of Mexican and Central American immigrants in the United States. Nevertheless, Mayer’s research on Argentinean

immigrants exhibits the fickleness of the application of the pan-Latino identity revealing the ways in which the dominant society manipulates the usage of such umbrella terms. Furthermore, it exhibits the complexities within the use of the pan-Latino identity as it embraces a diverse group of immigrants spanning continents, countries, and regions in South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico.

Through their research and methods, each scholar highlights some advantages and disadvantages of using the constructed pan-Latino identity. While this research realizes the convenience of using such umbrella terms, each author grasps the broad implication that can emerge from such blanket terms. While these scholars explored the inter-ethnic blanket terms used by the mainstream culture, the intra-ethnic tensions within these blanket terms are also important to discern and better understand the reasons for migration, the tensions, and the levels of acceptance by the mainstream culture.

Based on the struggles of Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants as they migrated from their respective countries to Los Angeles beginning in the 1980s, Hamilton and Chinchilla outline the efforts of these new immigrants to find community in a shifting global city. Fleeing unremitting civil unrest and increasing economic decline, Hamilton and Chinchilla state that Guatemalans and Salvadorans entered the United States as both economic immigrants and political refugees. As these immigrants adapted to the new challenges produced by a budding neoliberal agenda in the United States beginning in the early 1980s, the authors demonstrate the uniqueness of the individual experiences of immigrants from these Central American nations and their efforts to build community in Los Angeles while maintaining ties in Guatemala and El Salvador. Contextualizing the histories of these countries and examining shifting policies in the United States, the authors frame the challenges these immigrants face not only in adapting to life

in the this country, but also melding within intra-ethnic tensions with other immigrant populations in Los Angeles, particularly with the Mexican migrants who had preceded their journeys (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).

Likewise, through ethnographic observations, interviews, and informal stories of the day laborers in New Orleans the information revealed both inter- and intra-ethnic challenges of and solidarities formed within this small community of workers. The transnational narratives and everyday struggles to provide for themselves and their families here and back home illuminates the uniqueness of each individual experience of these migrant workers in their attempts to establish themselves in the Crescent City. Further, it demonstrates the ways in which these diverse day laborers come together to empower themselves through their commitment to grassroots, civil rights campaigns.

Pan-Ethnicity and Solidarity

While sitting on the front porch of the unmarked office of the Congress of Day Laborers conversation revolves around the weather, politics, working conditions, family, food, and life back home. It is a typical prelude to evening meetings as the day laborers and I engage in the age-old New Orleans tradition of front stoop sitting. The day laborers present are comprised of individuals from all over Latin America that have settled in New Orleans since Katrina. Languages and dialects spoken vary between the workers, from Guatemalan dialects to regional accents and distinct Spanish colloquialisms. Not only is there a variance in language, a range in the age, gender, and



Fig. 6. On the front stoop at the Congress of Day Laborer Meeting

immigration status of the workers also exists.

These day laborers carry out a variety of jobs across the Crescent City which include ongoing rebuilding efforts, work as cooks in restaurants, domestic employment, and carpentry. Often, the only commonality between these individuals is that they have left their homes and families behind in their respective countries of origin. Sadly, and too often, their encounters with wage theft, law enforcement abuse, discrimination, and other injustices also serve as means to unite these individuals.

The members of the Congress of Day Laborers meet weekly to organize themselves and develop individualized campaigns to promote civil rights. Past campaigns emerging from this solidarity and dedication have led to multiple successful strategies. These strategies range from major lawsuits against immigration authorities and criminal action against wage theft and police abuse to organization of vigils, marches, protests, and even successful collaborations with local officials in opening a day labor center. As these individuals struggle to establish themselves in this new environment and face difficulties interacting intra-ethnically with different Latin American cultures and inter-ethnically with the established New Orleans communities, multiple barriers impede their integration process. However, in my perspective, their presence on that front stoop and commitment to the Congress of Day Laborers is symbolic of and integral to their integration process into New Orleans life.

Inter-Ethnic Labels

Stemming from an initial interview while talking with Adonis, a day laborer from Honduras, I was enlightened upon a wealth of both inter- and intra-ethnic labels used by this day laborer population. This section addresses these ascribed and self-ascribed ethnic labels and demonstrates the ways in which Mexican and Central American day laborers perceive these

terms. During this interview with Adonis, we initially discussed the use of inter-ethnic terms. He condemned dominant society's use of more abrasive rhetoric such as "illegals" or "*mojados*" (wetbacks). He stated that he felt the use of the word "illegals" was offensive and "unjust" because of limitations put on "*Hispanos*" by policies. In regards to "*mojados*" he stated that it is extremely offensive, but, he laughingly said, "We call each other *mojados*."

Adonis concluded that he uses the word *Hispanos* to generalize Latin American immigrants, but states that there is ample difference between the various nationalities. Making note of these distinctions, Adonis alluded to the seemingly natural segregation that exists between the day laborers within the small spatial setting of the Gretna Workers' Center by pointing to the ways in which a group of Guatemalan day laborers stayed apart from the rest of the group. When asked why they are not mixed within the bigger group, he said that "they speak their own language different than Spanish" referring to one of over twenty indigenous languages spoken in Guatemala.

Throughout the interviews with the other day laborers, language played a major role in distinguishing the meaning of Hispanic or Latino. When speaking with Eusebia, she said, "In my case, I speak the language *quiché*. This is a language of my grandparents and my parents. In the United States, I learned to speak Spanish and I want to learn English too." She then mentioned that because of the influence and mixing of other Latin American groups, her Spanish continually shifts and takes on accents and vocabulary of other countries. She says, "The truth is that we are here from different countries in America, sometimes I speak Honduran style [Spanish], sometimes I speak like a Mexican, and then I speak like my country."

Juan Jose made a similar statement by saying, "I try to learn words from others because Spanish is different—how a Puerto Rican speaks is different; in Mexico it is different; and

between all of the other countries we speak differently. But if we understand some words or if I haven't learned them, then one tries to learn."

Santos also suggested that the Spanish language is a principle factor for being Latino. When asked what it means to be Latino, Santos said, "According to my criterion [Latinos] are the people that speak Spanish, the people that are not Anglo-Saxon, that aren't from the Anglo-Saxon race; not from the African-American race; not from the Asian race. For me, all of Latin America, those from South America, Central America, those from the Caribbean, these, for me, are Hispanics and Latinos."

For Alfredo from Mexico, he said that being Latino means "a way to identify ourselves; to not always having to say where you are from simply; other people identify us like this because they don't know if we are from Mexico or Guatemala or El Salvador. They simply call us Latino, but instead of always saying 'where are you from,' it is a way to identify us ourselves and the other people." When asked what term he prefers to be called between Latino or Mexican or Mexican American, Alfredo said, "It depends. If I am with Mexicans, then I will call them countrymen, or 'cousin' like we regularly say. But when we are with different friends from different countries, we call each Hispanics or Latinos."

When asked what he thought the word Latino means, Moises said, "That is the name that we use to denominate Latin Americans to show that we are from Central and South America." I asked Moises if he thought there is a difference between Latino and Hispanic? He said that they are "equal." I then asked him which term he preferred to be called and he said "Salvadoreno."

These interviews clearly demonstrate the diversity among these migrant workers. Perhaps, De Genova provides the most frank explanation in regards to the implications of the use such blanket terms to describe such a complex group of people. He states, "This is, likewise, a

call for research that is emphatically concerned with distinct migrations and that repudiates the validity of any claim to the existence of ‘the’ (generic) ‘immigrant experience’; there simply is no such animal” (2010: 424). As these were examples of the various inter-ethnic labels used by the dominant society in the United States for Latin American immigrants as defined by Latin American immigrants, the following section looks at the intra-ethnic labels that semantically exhibit these complexities of the migrant workers.

Intra-Ethnic Labels

During the same interviews, the participants were asked specifically about these intra-ethnic labels that were outlined by Adonis. Prior to the initial interview with Adonis, I was unaware of the use of intra-ethnic terms that Latinos use to self-identify. The interviewees were consistent with the various ethnic names representing the different Latin American countries. I tried to limit the labels to Central American and Mexican terms; however, once the informants began, it was difficult to limit creativity. For example, most offered that Cubans

Fig. 7. List of Intra-Ethnic Labels

Label	Country
<i>Canalero</i>	Panama
<i>Catracho</i>	Honduras
<i>Chapin</i>	Guatemala
<i>Chilango</i>	Mexico (City)
<i>Guanaco</i>	El Salvador
<i>Nica/Nicoya</i>	Nicaragua
<i>Tico</i>	Costa Rica

are *guajiros*, Puerto Ricans are *boriquas*, and one person provided *cafeteros* and *rollos* as terms used to describe Columbians. Once Columbians were brought into the picture, more derogatory terms like *cocaineros* were mentioned, ironically by a Columbian, although I made an effort to steer the epithets both northward and less stereotypical. Further, in pursuit of more broad names, I tried to avoid the regional names such as *portiseño* or *ceibeño* which describe people from San Juan de Potosí, Mexico and Ceiba, Honduras, respectively. To discover the anecdotal

etymologies of these labels, I asked each interviewee if she knew the roots or the significance of the words. Alfredo, who considered himself a *chilango*, being from Mexico City, gave a couple of explanations for the word. He said, “*Chilango* is not intended to be negative, but some people use it negatively.” In reference to the actual etymology, he was unaware of where it originated from, but that it is frequently used to “identify people from Mexico City by the way they talk; by their accent.”

Similarly, when asked the significance of the word *guanaco*, Moises from El Salvador was unsure of where the word originated. Moises said, “For me, I don’t know what the word *guanaco* means, sincerely, we hear it and everyone just calls us that.” Juan Jose, also from El Salvador, said that *guanaco* is “a little animal, like a kangaroo,” but he said that he really did not know the meaning behind calling people *guanacos*. He said, “I don’t know why they gave us this name.” When I asked if the use of *guanaco* is offensive, he said, “Nobody gets mad because it is a nickname for the country, not just for one single person, but more for all of the country.” I asked Moises the same question regarding if *guanaco* is offensive and he said, “No, for me it is not offensive. To me, it is something normal to hear in all the parts where there are Salvadorans.”

Santos discussed his feelings regarding the intra-ethnic labels used for people from Honduras. He said, “To us, for example, the Hondurans, they call us *catrachos*. It doesn’t bother me that they say that to me. I like that they say it. For example, to the Salvadorans, we call them *guanacos*; to the Costa Ricans, they are called *ticos*; Panamanians are called *canaleros*, and this is how people are identified by zone.” I asked him if any of these terms were offensive and he said, “No, they are not offensive to anyone because I have never heard a *tico* get mad

because they say *tico*; a *chapin* either; it all depends on the form of language that one uses to express themselves with various people.”

When I asked Santos the significance of the word *tico* he stated that it come from the ways in which Costa Ricans use the diminutive suffix forms of words. He said, “When *ticos* say things are little, like how in Honduras would say *chiquito*, *ticos* say *chiquitico*. That’s why. Because of the words they say.” Likewise, when asked the significance of the word *catracho* Santos said he did not know what it meant, but that it was just a word “that everybody uses.”

Upon further investigation, I found that one theory of the origin of the word *catracho* came from

Florencio Xatruch who was a Honduran general during the war against Nicaragua in 1856. It is reported that during the war, Nicaraguan troops would reference Xatruch’s troops by saying “here come the *xatruches*” and, overtime, *xatruches* converted into *catrachos* (Sanchez 2004).



Fig. 8. Day Laborers in Gretna

When asked about her thoughts regarding the use of the word *chapin* for Guatemalans, Eusebia laughed and said, “Yes, that is what we call ourselves and what people call us. See them?” she asked, pointing to two Guatemalan guys sitting in a corner, “They are *chapines*.” When asked if *chapin* has any significance, she said, “No, not really. It is just the people. But

only the Guatemalan people.” Juan Jose said, “When you are already friends with a person, you can say ‘how’s it going *catracho*?’ or if I am hanging out with someone I already know, he can call me *guanaco*. It is like how I am from El Salvador and how all of us carry with us a nickname of all the countries. Like in Mexico they call each other *chilango*, or *jarocho*, or *portosinos*, and all of that.”

As these are only a few examples of labels used by the New Orleans day laborer community, they do demonstrate the ways in which Latino immigrants categorize one another intra-ethnically and some perceptions of inter-ethnic labels. These various labels show the diversities that do exist within this pan-Latino identity and, in my experience talking with these specific immigrants, the intra-ethnic terms are more endearing than derogatory, providing just another means of classifying groups of people with distinct cultures and origins. Further, by examining the collective action of the Congress of Day Laborers—how these individuals unite through organization in order to identify, assess, and effectively combat challenges to basic civil rights—demonstrates the positive outcomes that can emerge through the solidarity of this pan-ethnic group. Therefore these categorical homogenizations as applied by the dominant society are not always oppressive in that this group and other national movements have united under these pan-Latino labels in the struggle for civil rights.

This research now attempts to examine how the ethnic foodways contribute to the vulnerabilities of these migrant workers by examining the liminal state of the people and their food culture. One salient theme that emerged during fieldwork was the transient nature of both the migrant workers and some of the food establishments that keep them fed.

VI. TRANSCIENCE: THE POP UP OF PEOPLE AND THEIR FOODWAYS

Solo voy con mi pena
Sola va mi condena
Correr es mi destino
Para burlar la ley
Perdido en el corazón
De la grande Babylon
Me dicen el clandestino
Por no llevar papel.

I go only with my punishment
There goes only my conviction
Running is my fate
In order to deceive the law
Lost in the heart
Of the great Babylon
They call me the Clandestine
Because I don't carry papers

-Manu Chao, *Clandestino*

“They Just Come and Go”

I met with Cristina, the owner of Taqueria Falcon, at her home in New Orleans East. We sat in the living room of her trailer in a neighborhood populated with the majority Vietnamese and Latino families. As she rocked her newborn baby in a car seat on the floor, her six year old son, Angel, joined us in the living room, adding his own comments during the interview. Cristina, in her late thirties, was soft-spoken, but eager and proud to tell the story of her flourishing business.

When asked about the clientele that frequent her *lonchera* (food truck), Cristina said that they usually get the same customers that come to the truck each day. She said the majority are Latinos from Honduras, but there are Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and very few Mexicans. When asked further about the regular clientele Cristina eloquently talked about the transience of the community, essentially summing up the liminal state in which this migrant working class community is often implicated. She elaborates:

New ones (Latinos) come, and some older clients leave. They will come and work for two months, sometimes six months, and then they go...the new people will come and will start to figure things out from the people already here. They find out that we are here. And we know that they are new because they won't know us. And we will notice that people have left because they won't show up and we will ask, 'What happened to this person, they stopped coming?' And people will say, 'No, so and so just left for Houston, or they will just say that they aren't from here.' They just come and go.

During my fieldwork I also discovered that, like the people, some of the food establishments “come and go” too. One of the most fascinating elements I found during this study was the concept of pop-up food vendors. What I would consider pop-up restaurants for the Latin American market are these furtive entrepreneurs that make a profit by fulfilling the on-site needs of a niche market that demands cheap, fast, delicious Latin American foods. I classify these pop-up restaurants as the almost impenetrable food vendors that I came across on rare occasions. Most of these vendors were able to elude my interview attempts because of the precarious nature of their trade and/or because I regrettably postponed these chance interviews thinking that I would have a similar encounter at a later point.

Cartchens? Kitchvans? Cars and Vans with Built-In Kitchens

On three different occasions, while visiting the day laborers’ centers (once in Gretna and twice in New Orleans) I encountered the most fascinating and perhaps, most hidden of all the food vendors—automobiles with the kitchens installed inside. In my first experience, the van arrived under the bridge in Gretna and the day laborers flocked to it immediately. I initially thought it was a contractor and the guys were merely surrounding the car to request work. But after a few minutes, they each walked away from the car with platefuls of tacos and bowls of *guisado* (stew). Because I was caught completely off guard and in utter amazement, I could only gaze from afar, admiring the stainless steel rigged kitchen exposed as the driver of the van popped open the back door.

At that point in my work with the Congress of Day Laborers, I had yet to gain much rapport with the day laborers’ groups, and I could sense some hesitation from Soriano as I began to approach the van. He politely warned me that the women in the van might be apprehensive and closed up regarding their precarious business because they had been recently arrested for the

lack of licensing for their enterprise. Complying with his recommendation, I stayed back and watched in awe as the women took orders and prepared these dishes, and the day laborers made their orders.

As I watched, two levels of shelving lifted up in the van as the back door raised open. There were a couple of hot plates filled with pots of fresh *guisado*. A crock pot was plugged into an outlet, which I can only assume was attached with multiple plugs to the DC connector. The crock pots were likely filled with *barbacoa* (slow cooked cow meat) or *carne asada* (grilled steak) for the tacos. Two women worked diligently serving food to the approximately 15-20 men, collecting money, and making change. Judging by the playful banter between the women and the workers, it was evident that they had been to the Day Laborers' Center on multiple occasions. I witnessed as the same van arrive one other time in Gretna. A similar scene ensued, and I watched as they purchased food from the mobile vendors. These experiences were unique, and I have not seen them in Gretna since.

At the Day Labor Corner on Carrolton Avenue and Toulouse Street in front of Home Depot, I witnessed a similar experience, except the kitchen was installed in the back of a small hatchback car. It was equally as impressive with the compact, stainless steel shelving and utensils. The hatchback opened up and revealed the small kitchen. I was able to get a closer view of the car, but a lack of cash prevented me from purchasing tacos, which would have inevitably led to some levels of conversation with the women. Instead, I watched as the women prepared tacos, added freshly chopped cilantro and onion which had just been diced up on a cutting board next to the hot plate. One woman took the requests as the other heated up the tortillas, added the meat and toppings, plated the dishes, and served the men. They had an

efficient system and even seemed to shield the mini-kitchen with their bodies to obstruct any direct views into the car from the police or any nosy passerby.

As we were leaving the Day Laborers' center, Denis told me that those women had also been pressured by the police because of lack of licensing, but he was unsure if they had been arrested. Judging by the stealth of their service and the surreptitiousness of their hidden kitchen, I cannot imagine them ever being caught.

Tamales, Tamales



Fig. 9. Tamale Vendors in Front of Ideal Grocery Store

The next major pop-up phenomena that I witnessed were the tamale vendors who sit outside the Ideal Supermarket on Friday nights. On my most recent visit to Ideal on a Friday night, the vendors were two different women than the ones who had sold tamales in that spot in the past. When I asked them what had happened to the other women, Louisa, the mother in her late fifties, said with a big grin on her face, "Ours are better." Her daughter nodded her head in approval as she sold a

plastic bag full of tamales to a customer. As they worked in the shadows of the Ideal Supermarket sign, the women would coyly yell "Tamales, tamales" to the Latin American customers as they came in and out of the supermarket.

The two Honduran women said they showed up on the corner around 5 P.M. to sell their cooler full of tamales. When I asked her how many tamales they sell, Louisa said, "A lot,

hundreds.” Pointing to a car nearby, she said, “We have more in there. In the trunk.” Before I could get out another question, she was explaining to me how she and her daughter take requests for tamales, and they deliver them directly to your house. And, before I knew it, I was eagerly plugging Louisa’s number into my cell phone to have my own tamale maker and deliverer on call. That night we bought four tamales, one without meat and three chicken flavored ones. The tamales were Honduran style, wrapped in the traditional banana leaf. The cornmeal mash was sweet, and the chicken bone was a bit of a surprise as I bit into the tamale.

As these are only a few examples that I witnessed of these pop-up vendors, it provides a glimpse into the everyday lives of a portion of this population. Further, it provides a sophisticated understanding of the nuances of these groups of people by demonstrating how these underground markets emerge to respond to the gastronomic demands of this transient population. Moreover, it exposes how these particular foodways contribute to the vulnerabilities of this migrant population. The vulnerabilities arise through the precarious nature of the underground pop-up business vendors and their lack of licensing. Like the migrant worker population, these vendors are targeted for their putative illegality and therefore forced to maintain these furtive, shadowed lives.

But, clearly there is a demand for these onsite food deliverers. The migrant workers must be fed and they have their own acquired palettes for their traditional, respective cuisines. An unfamiliar jambalaya will not yet suffice for a *guisado de pollo* (chicken stew). And, a muffaletta is no replacement for a *gordita*. These Latin American vendors offer affordable foods onsite that are culturally appropriate and seemingly adhere to the tastes of these immigrants. But, what exactly are they buying from these vendors? And, how do these specific foods mirror the diversity of its consumers?

VII. BALEADAS AND CHIMICHANGAS: THE HYBRIDITY OF FOODS

“How are we helping our restaurants that are trying to recover by having more food trucks from Texas open up? How do the tacos help gumbo?”

-City Councilman Over Thomas
The Times-Picayune June 28, 2007

“Sometimes, they make the *gordida* bread from scratch in the trailer, so ask (*gordidas* today, per favor?) [sic]

-“Marcaroni” on Taqueria DF on Claiborne Ave.⁶

“It’s clear Telamar serves comfort cooking incarnate for its target audience”

-Ian McNulty in “A Honduran Restaurant with a Central American soul.”

Intra-Ethnic Hybridity

As food is one of many markers of distinction for these migrant workers, at Norma’s Bakery, Ivan discussed the differences between Central American and Mexican foods. He established that the cuisines from Mexico and Central America were distinct, positing that the foods from



Fig. 10. Ivan Taking an Order at Norma’s Bakery

Honduras are the most distinctive because they do not use much sauce and, he said they use “too much cumin” and “put coconut milk in everything.” Later he said what sets Mexican food apart from the rest of the Central American countries is that Mexicans “put a lot of chili (peppers) in the food.” He posits, “There are some [Mexican] states that use a lot of picante, and some that don’t.” When I asked about the other countries, he replied, “It (the food) is different in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua. They have a similar touch that is close to Mexican food.” But he goes on to say, “The big difference is that

they rarely eat tortillas. They eat more *guineo verde* (unripe bananas), fried plantains, and other things like that.” While I found Ivan’s description to be accurate, I used menus from the different restaurant to determine specific ways in which these pan-ethnic dishes come together. Provided below is a brief description of the restaurants and then an analysis of the menus displayed at the restaurants.

Menus

Los Portales, which opened in June 2011, sits alone on Elysian Fields Avenue and Galvez Street, right under the nest of interstate bridges. The bright yellow building boasts painted signs in the front and side walls which read, “Mexican Restaurant,” and “Mexican Buffet,” and has menu items painted on the exterior wall. Inside the restaurant, the décor is inviting and colorful evoking symbols of Mexican nationalism. A large portrait of Mexican revolutionary, Emiliano Zapata, black and white images depicting old family dinners, and some trinkets seemingly representative of the Mexican Revolution are displayed throughout Los Portales. These items were accompanied by kitschy décor like sombreros and piñatas, which seem to multiply each time I visit the restaurant and are reminiscent of what would be expected in most Tex Mex “Mexican Restaurants” that denote a preconceived image of a generic Mexico.

The restaurant is rather large with a spacious dining room. On my first two visits, the kitchen was visible from the dining room with a large window opening allowing patrons to watch as the women diligently worked to prepare handmade tortillas, soups, and other made-to-order dishes. However, on my most recent visit, the window had been covered up with a large poster with pictures of various Latin American foods, which did not necessarily seem to match up with the items listed on the menu.

Two separate menus (one in English and one in Spanish) were initially available at Los Portales. The English version listed items such as “American Enchiladas” and “Meat *Azada*.” Descriptions like “Mexican Plate: A Flauta Stuffed tortilla Chicken Breast with Rice beans and *Aguacate* and Salad” provided a mastery of the Spanglish language to depict the dishes available. During my latest visit, I noticed that the menu had slightly changed as it was consolidated with English translations of the dishes, which were provided below each name. Further, the new menu incorporated more intra-ethnic dishes, adding Honduran dishes like *baleadas* (thick tortilla filled with beans, eggs, cheese, meat, and avocado) and *pollo con tajadas* (fried chicken with fried plantains) to their menu, which before consisted almost exclusively of Mexican foods (with the exception of Salvadoran *pupusas*).

Similarly, Los Paisanos is a Mexican restaurant situated in a small strip mall next to a Laundromat and adjacent to Jazz Daquiris on the corner of Louisiana and Claiborne Avenues. The sign advertises the *mirepoix* of New Orleanian entertainment services: food, bar, and gambling. At the front of the restaurant are two entrances: one from the street and the other conveniently connects Los Paisanos to the neighboring Laundromat. As you walk in, there is a Latin-infused jukebox, an ATM on the left, and the ever-present poker gaming station on the right. The décor is colorful, yet simple, with one yellow wall adorned with an Aztec-themed border print and a cactus mural. On the multiple occasions I have visited this little dive, all at lunch time, I have sat at the bar in the back of the restaurant. The bar top faces the open kitchen where two friendly Mexican women both prepare the food and take orders. To the left of the bar top is a giant menu hanging on the wall.

Displayed on the menu are the seventeen numbered food items offered with photographs depicting most of the dishes. Some of the menu items, particularly the *caldos* or soups, are only

served on the weekends. The staff and the owners at Los Paisanos identify as Mexican and the restaurant name “paisanos” even denotes hints of patriotism and national pride as it literally means “countrymen” in Spanish. The menu is in mostly Spanish with some English words like “Breakfast” and “sandwich.” But despite touting itself as a Mexican restaurant, it is infused with Central American dishes. Salvadoran *pupusas* (a circular dough filled with cheese and other toppings) and dishes from Honduras like *pollo con tajadas* and *baleadas* are listed along with typical Mexican dishes like burritos, tacos, and *gorditas* (a pita-like tortilla filled with meat,

lettuce, tomato, cheese).

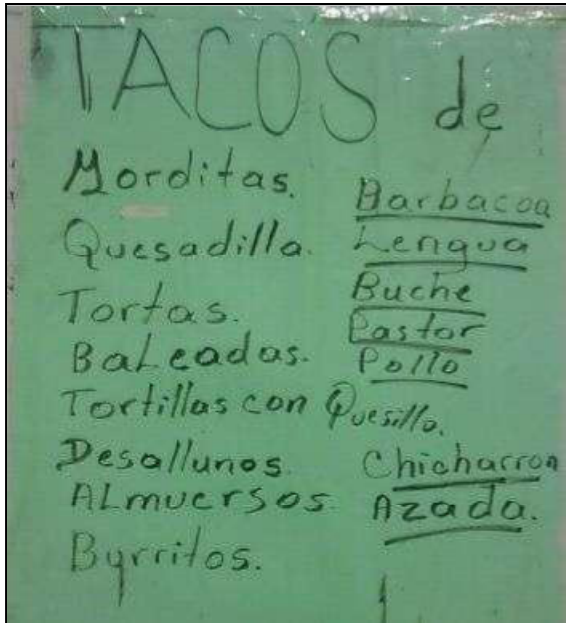


Fig. 11. Menu at Taqueria D.F. on Elysian Fields

When I first visited the Mexican-owned Taqueria D.F. *lonchera* (on Elysian Fields Avenue) they had a menu in Spanish handwritten on green paper which had been covered in plastic. The menu was suspended on the truck next to the window and advertised burritos, quesadillas, *baleadas*, *tortas* (sandwiches), and *tortillas con quesillo* (a tortilla with cheese). Listed on the sign were the different types of meats that could be

chosen for the tacos, consisting of anything from tongue to *chicharron* (fried pig skin) to *al pastor* (seasoned pork sometimes with pineapple). The menu no longer hangs from the *lonchera* for reasons unbeknownst to me; however, the same fixed items are served at the truck with some variability of meats offered.

At Taqueria Falcon, Cristina said that some non-Latinos come to the truck too and she said, “All they want to eat are burritos. They really like the burritos and the *tortas* too.” There is

no menu on display at the *lonchera*; however, Cristina says that they have the typical Central American and Mexican foods available at all times which consists of tacos, burritos, quesadillas, *tortas*, *gorditas*, *baleada*, and *pupusas*. She says they also serve *guisados* daily and these ingredients sometimes change. They offer *caldo de menudo* (cow stomach soup) on the weekends, which she says semi-jokingly, “is to help people with their hangovers.”

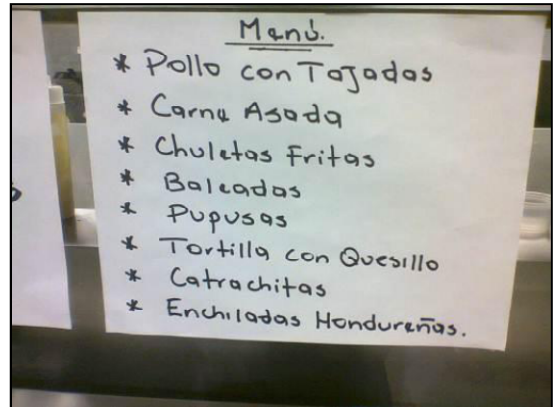


Fig. 12. Intra-ethnic menu at Norma's Bakery

Norma's Bakery is owned by Hondurans, but the menu is selected by head cook, Ivan, a Mexican. A sign handwritten in black ink on a piece of 8 1/2 by 11 white paper lists the fixed menu for the day. The list hangs off the hot plate line and has selections of food from Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador. Written on the sign is even a dish called *catrachitas*, which literally means “little Hondurans” but is actually a hard, flat tortilla shell with meat on top. Ivan says that that is the fixed menu served daily, but the foods, which mainly consist of *guisados*, change daily, depending on what ingredients are available that day.

These are only a few samples and descriptions of the menus analyzed. They each demonstrate the hybridity of the food selections available, which clearly denotes the adaptations made in order to provide for the diverse Latin American populations. On one hand, simple supply and demand economics explains the reasoning behind the intra-ethnic menus; however, what is most evident is that these menus are adapting a pan-ethnic menu with dishes to coincide with the tastes of their customers. To determine how the cooks adjust to make these new typical dishes, I asked Ana, Ivan, Cristina, and Vanesa to explain their process of learning these dishes.

Learning New Dishes

While at Los Portales, I talked to Ana, who is from a small coastal Mexican. She said most of her past cooking experiences involved seafood dishes with fresh fish and shrimp. When I asked her how she learned to cook the Central American dishes listed on the menu, she said, “Well, we do not really have a choice. There are so many people from Honduras; we have to make Honduran food. So, I just learned. I think it is good and I like to learn new recipes and test them out.” On more than one occasion I have ordered the *baleada* and been very impressed with their Mexican take on the Honduran dish.

At Norma’s bakery, Ivan said that when he does not know how to make a dish, he asks his friends for recommendations on where to get it. He used the example of someone who came into Norma’s Bakery and asked for the Honduran dish, *Carne Asada a la Ceibeña*. He said that he asks his Honduran friends for recommendations and he continued:

They begin to say names of restaurants, and I begin to write them down. Depending on the restaurants that are named the most, these are the restaurants where I go. I eat there. And, I am a person that is a slow eater. For me to eat a plate of *carne asada a la Ceibeña*, will take me like an hour. Because I am trying the sauce to determine what is in it, the plantain, I try to taste it, enjoy it to just figure out how much salt to even use. And when I get to work the next day, I start to practice making the dish. If it doesn’t work out like it tasted the night before, I try it again, and again, until it turns out good. That is how it goes. That is how I learned to make things, like that.

When talking about his assistant, a young, Honduran woman named Sara, Ivan told about how adaptable she was to the new cuisines and how quickly she was able to learn the dishes from other countries. He said, “She didn’t even know how to make *pupusas* and she learned to make them. In a day. I brought the dough and explained to her how to make them. You can tell when a person likes it.”

Likewise, Cristina of the Mexican *lonchera*, Taqueria Falcon, discussed the ways in which she learned how to make the Central American cuisine. She said that she learned to make it for her clients, because they would tell her that she should sell *baleadas*. She asked her own clients how to make them, and they gave her the recipes for the dishes and she “started practicing at home, making the different foods and when I saw that they were coming out good, the stews and stuff, I started making their foods, the *baleadas* and *pupusas*.” When asked what her favorite food they serve is she said, “Burritos or *baleadas*.” Laughing, she said, “Since the first time I tried *baleadas*, I have liked them because they are something that in Mexico, aren’t sold and we aren’t familiar with them, and they are so flavorful.” Adapting and adopting these new dishes from other countries is one way in which these Latin American immigrants are able to re-define themselves in this dominant society.

Tamales and Chimichangas

Perhaps most intriguing and relevant observation to this portion of the study is the tamales organized on a rack below the hot line at Norma’s Bakery. Five different types of tamales are offered each day. Ivan said that they sell Honduran, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Mexican, and Guatemalan tamales. He said there is not a “huge difference between the Nicaraguan and Honduran tamales, except that they both have rice and potatoes inside.” Ivan further clarified his tamale perspective, saying that the Salvadoran tamales are the best because they include ingredients like cumin, olives, potatoes, carrot, yucca, and tomato sauce. He also said that Guatemalans add a special chili pepper to their tamales, which makes the sauce different. He went on to state, “I can say that there is a huge variety of tamales—*mole* tamales, *salsa verde* tamales, cheese tamales, candied tamales, and sweet potato tamales.” Ivan then added his personal touch saying, “In my tamales, from Veracruz, I put a red sauce with pork.



Fig. 13. Tamale Variety at Norma's Bakery

Delicious.” The tamales alone are enough to demonstrate the ways in which Latin American foods mirror the intra-ethnic diversity of the pan-Latino identity.

On the other hand, the chimichanga mirrors the use of the pan-ethnic identities in that like the word “Latino” or “Hispanic,” the

chimichanga is a food created in the United States and is a constructed representation of “Mexican” cuisine. When I asked Ivan about chimichangas he said, “These types of things exist in Mexico. You know, that this is more found in the north. On the border. Where I am from, Veracruz, I didn’t know what they were. I didn’t even know they existed. I arrived in the United States and I learned how to make it. It is a flour tortilla; like a burrito, but fried.”

Likewise, when talking to the day laborers about their familiarity with chimichangas, everyone but Santos said they had never heard of a chimichanga. Of the 9 people interviewed, Santos was the only one that had heard of a chimichanga. When I asked Santos, a Honduran, he said curiously, “A chimichanga? I have heard of it, but I don’t know specifically what it is. But some friends have told me about it and I more or less have an idea. It is a food, it is something like, well, they have told me that it is almost like a hotdog, but more or less it is an empanada.” Of the ten restaurants visited, Taqueria Guerrero was the only one that had chimichanga listed on the menu. I would argue that this is due to the large numbers of non-Latinos that frequent Taqueria Guerrero and are mistaken perception that a chimichanga originated in Mexico.

Moreover, the current debate in Arizona and Oklahoma is to pinpoint the exact origin of the chimichanga. Arguing that the chimichanga is from Arizona originally, Arizona lawmakers

are currently attempting to officially register chimichangas as their state food. In a *New York Times* article, Lacey reports that a group in Phoenix, “has started a petition drive to lobby the Legislature to officially adopt the chimichanga, as lawmakers have done for the bolo tie (official neckwear), the saguaro blossom (official flower) and the Colt revolver (official firearm).”

Ironically, some of these same Arizona lawmakers that will soon vote on the acceptance of the *chimichanga* as their state food are the ones who voted to implement the exclusionary, anti-immigrant policies that are sweeping across the country. This example typifies the contradictory concept of wanting a culture, in this case the fried burrito, but vilifying the same groups of people who introduced these rich ingredients. These examples are not unique to food, they transcend across other cultural factors such as language, music, and visual art.

Inter-Ethnic Hybridity and the Dualities of Foods

While the intra-ethnic hybridity of the foods looks at the ways in which the menus and cooks adapt to the populations, this section looks at ways in which restaurants attempt to cater to the non-Latino clientele through hybridity and dualities of foods. By using Sylvia Ferrero’s aforementioned concept of “dual life” of Latin Americans in the United States (2002: 214) this section looks at ways in which foodways contribute to these dualities and to the construction of this pan-Latino identity. Further, this section explores the ways in which the dominant society, knowingly and unknowingly, suppresses food culture by using linguistic generalizations of people and gastronomic standardizations of foods.

Ferrero demonstrates this “dual life” of immigrants through interviews and participant observation by exploring the foodways of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles. Through these “dual lives” Ferrero (2002) shows how Latin American owned food establishments market standardized dishes to satisfy the standardized penchants of “Anglo” customers. Meanwhile the

same restaurant offers a different menu, which features more traditional dishes familiar to the Mexican American population. Ferrero and other scholars (Bost 2003; Pilcher 2001) argue that this standardization prevents the dominant society from grasping the full complexity of the Latin American culture spanning across regions of Mexico and throughout Central and South America.

Likewise, Pilcher (2001) reveals this failure of dominant society to fully comprehend the diversity of Mexican cuisine because of their limited perspective and exposure to the wide range of Latin American dishes. He stated that “residents of the United States often have a peculiar view of Mexican food, drawn more from Mexican American restaurants or from fast food simulations than from actual experience south of the border (2001: 659).

These perspectives stem from the widespread prominence of the standardized “Mexican” restaurants whose menus more closely reflect Tex Mex food, rather than the more traditional dishes of Mexico and other



Fig. 14. Sign in Abita Springs, LA reads in Spanish, “Typical Honduran Soups and Dishes”

Latin American countries. Congruent with Ferrero’s argument, Pilcher goes on to state that Mexican-Americans think they must conform to the presumably standardized palettes of the dominant society in order to be successful in the market in that they “face the contradictory impulses to preserve their culture intact or profit from adapting the foods for a general audience” (2001: 670).

Furthermore, Pilcher uses the concept of combination plates as quintessential dishes that demonstrate these dualities in that they “offer little of the rich complexity of Mexico's regional cuisines.” While combination plates are rare south of the border, Pilcher argues, that combination

plates “do have a history of their own, one that reflects the ongoing struggle of Mexican Americans to gain acceptance and citizenship in the United States” (2001: 659). He argues that combination plates are simplified ways for the dominant society to consume the “other” in that oftentimes “Numbering the combination plates relieved non-Spanish speakers of the need to pronounce what they were eating” (2001: 670-671). While this is an example of the ways in which restaurant owners conform to accommodate the needs of non-Latin Americans, Jones examines the symbolism within the foods themselves.

By examining past studies on food and symbolism, Jones (2007) explores the “symbolic nature of gastronomy” and focuses on the lack of research done on the foodways in regards to both ethnic symbolism and dietary health. Jones states that in regards to community festivals put on by the Latin American community, “Participants in regional events highlighting ethnic identity usually consume esoteric dishes behind closed doors while publicly displaying those that have been accepted by the dominant society” (2007: 146). At festivals, ethnic participants question whether to serve dishes that are “Americanized” or “more ‘authentic’” (2007: 146) thus further contributing to this concept of dualities of Latin American immigrants and cuisine.

Moreover, Bost is far more skeptical of the dominant society in the United States and its efforts to “(neo) colonialize” Latin American food and food establishments. Critical of the non-Latino manipulation and selective incorporation of the Latino culture Bost states that dominant society “consume(s) only a limited fantasy of Mexico” which “make light of the Mexican presence in the United States” (2003: 512). Bost is especially critical of putative Mexican restaurants, which she claims feign “*jouissance* in the absence of boundaries only to make the border more visible as a threatened symbol, keeping national integrity on the map like a fortress under siege” (2003: 512). Bost explains that these restaurant experiences are not genuine and

merely reinforce the distinctions and disparities between Latin American migrants and the dominant society that frequents these establishments.

“It is Either Us or the Gas Station”

To empirically examine the dualities and inter-ethnic hybridity, I spoke with Vanesa who works in the food truck which has been in front of Lowe’s for over three years. The *lonchera*, Taqueria D.F., is located on the small road that veers off towards Florida Avenue from Elysian Fields Avenue. Parked in the green space between the service road and Lowe’s, the truck could easily go unnoticed. There is a sign painted on the roadside of the white truck that reads

“Taqueria D.F.,” which is in reference to Mexico City, Mexico. Ironically, the three women that



Fig. 15. Taqueria D.F. on Elysian Fields

work in Taqueria D.F. are from Honduras, and the food they serve is an intra-ethnic medley of Honduran and Mexican cuisine. Inside the truck the women work diligently to prepare the orders. It is a cramped space, approximately 80 square feet, plus the complete kitchen, sinks, and the three people working

side-by-side, almost in dance-like fashion, taking orders, making change, and preparing foods.

With the stovetops constantly running and the hot plates warming the *guisados*, it makes for an extremely compact work setting, especially in the middle of the sweltering New Orleans summer.

According to Vanesa the clientele that frequents the *lonchera* consists mostly of Latino workers. She said that most of them “are from Honduras and I know that because they always want to tell me about where they are from in Honduras and ask me about my *pueblo*.” Vanesa stated that non-Latinos come to the truck as well. She said that some of the non-Spanish

speaking day laborers that wait nearby “eat the food too because they see the *catrachos* (slang for Hondurans) eating the food, and they think it looks good. And, they are hungry and we are right there; close by and cheap. It is either us or the gas station.” Further, she stated, “The contractors, the bosses, they come, too. The *gavachos* (white guys) like the tacos. That is what they usually get. Or the *tortas*.” “And,” she says laughingly, “They try to speak Spanish, but it doesn’t come out well.”

Ivan from Norma’s Bakery said, “Of course, some Americans come, too. They come more for the Cuban Sandwich or the Mexican food.” He went on to say that they do not order the food because it is Mexican food, “rather because Americans just eat more Mexican food.” Ivan elaborated:

But they don’t eat a dish with yucca, you understand. Yeah, they don’t really ask for a plate of yucca or yucca with *chicharron*, they ask more for a chicken burrito, quesadillas, or nachos with cheese. Whereas, a Latino will ask for other things like meat and corn tortillas.

At Los Paisanos, two non-Latino construction workers came into the restaurant and took over the space at the bar top. We listened as the men practiced their admittedly broken Spanish with Ana and her co-worker. The men were polite and seemed genuine in their intent on practicing their Spanish and getting a good meal. They each ordered quesadillas “*con pollo*” as they laughed at each other’s Spanish speaking efforts.

Exception to Hybridity

Unlike restaurants like Norma’s Bakery or Los Paisanos, Telamar is a restaurant that almost exclusively serves Honduran foods. The menu is in Spanish and has a special *almuerzo* (lunch) foods with numbered listings. The only exception to the exclusivity of Honduran foods is the availability of “Tacos Mexicanos” listed on the menu, which I have never tried. But what

is it about Telamar that enables them to maintain an almost exclusive Honduran menu, but other establishments must incorporate these intra-ethnic dishes?

The first time I visited Telamar was when it was located on Earhart Expressway in an old Daiquiri spot. At that time, the Honduran restaurant, owned by mother and daughter duo, Elisabeth and Daisy, was split into two sections. The first section consisted of a bar area with pool tables, loud Latin music, and at that moment, a room full of men, who seemed to be generously celebrating the beginning of a weekend. The other half was a crowded room with a few tables pushed together and some sensual beer advertisements with voluptuous women hanging on the wall.

The restaurant has since changed locations and reopened in a strip mall on Washington Avenue and Broad Street. While the strip mall itself is difficult to find, the restaurant is just as hidden and the only sign is a giant “Open” sign that tends to stay lit despite the fact that the restaurant is closed. The two sections from the previous space have merged into one cramped, but cozy room with dining tables and a bar top. The sensual posters remain, but the pool tables have been replaced by a small poker gaming area. A sizeable, window-esque opening between the sitting area and the kitchen allows diners to watch as the cooks sauté foods, fry chips, blend juices, and even make the fresh tortillas.

Elisabeth always welcomes me with a smile, and sometimes an affable kiss on the cheek. She and Daisy are eager to greet and interact with all customers especially the regular customers that come to the restaurant. When talking with Elisabeth about the foods, she said that mostly Honduran customers come into the restaurant. She explained people from Mexico and El Salvador come to Telamar, but they come with other Hondurans, and she said, “They like our food. They think it is good, and it is.”

One of the kitchen staff at Telamar, Eusebia, is Guatemalan and a member of the Congress of Day Laborers. She said that she likes learning new recipes from Telamar, but she would never cook them at home. When asked why, she stated that,

The ingredients that they use at the restaurant are so different. I use my own recipes, and I use a lot of spice, chilies, and make *pepian de gallina* (a chicken dish with peppers and pumpkin seed). Plus, we eat more tortillas. There, they eat a lot of plantains. Fried plantains. They are good, but, it is different than what I am used to.

When talking about the dishes she helps prepare at Telamar, Eusebia said that she likes them and she especially likes to “try

new dishes and to learn how to prepare them.” When I asked her what her favorite thing to prepare at Telamar, she said the *sopa de caracol* (conch soup). She went through the process of how the soup is made, from using the different seasonings, to adding the coconut



Fig. 16. Conch soup at Telamar

milk, *guineo verde*, and the conch meat itself. I finally tried the *sopa de caracol* and her detailed description definitely lived up to her enthusiasm.

Why is Telamar able to avoid the inter- and intra-ethnic hybridity, with the exception of the “Mexican Tacos” and a Guatemalan staff member? Is it as simple as the fact that there are more Hondurans in New Orleans? That would definitely be a factor in this restaurant’s success. Or, perhaps it is this increased understanding of the richness and existence of these more obscure

foods that, arguably, had been masked by this quest for a familiar, perpetuated image of “authentic” Mexican cuisine.

The restaurant Telamar demonstrates how foodways can contribute to an increased understanding of the diversity that exists within the pan-ethnic identity. Increased knowledge by the dominant society regarding these diverse Latin American restaurants and food dishes can create a more holistic understanding of these complex individuals. While food, in this case, is just a metaphor for these vast differences between these groups, it also serves as a palatable means of fostering more expansive knowledge and more sympathetic appreciation for these migrant workers. Further, by sampling these less familiar dishes dominant society can move beyond this romanticized, preconceived notion of Mexican food in order to explore other complex foods and ingredients found within these menus. Accordingly, the following section explores this concept of authenticity and components that comprise this preconceived image of “authentic” Mexican cuisine.

VIII. ANTOJOS AND AUTHENTICITY: TASTING THE “OTHER”

“It is extremely authentic Honduran. 100% of the customers and staff were Spanish speaking immigrants. They did have an English version of the menu, but what we ordered was nothing like we expected. It was not exactly Mexican, at least not any Mexican I have ever had. And it was not spicy at all -- though hot sauce was available on the table.”

-“Ray Cannata” on Telamar⁸

“After the storm, we got Latin taco trucks. For real, with actual Latin employees and customers. When Jefferson Parish misguidedly decided they were a menace somehow, Taqueria Sanchez bought a snowball stand. Voila. I’m not an expert on authentic Mexican v. Honduran v. Tex-mex cuisine. I’m from Minnesota, right. But this has got to be the real deal from somewhere.”

-“Machelle H. on Taqueria Sanchez⁹

This combined literature review and fieldwork experience helped to outline the dualities of Latin American cuisine in the United States and expose the ways in which these more traditional Central American dishes have been hidden away as standardized menus of *chimichangas*, fajitas, and quesadillas have taken their place. This following literature stirs the next research questions: Can the dominant society become more open to and aware of the

complexity within the Latin American immigrant culture simply by tasting the “other”? And, how does dominant society define the “other”?

In examining power structures within ethnic foods, Jones claims that, “Who prepares the food, serves it, and cleans up; where people take their meals; the shape of a table; and who sits where and talks about what—all these convey roles, values, and ideas about gender, hierarchy, and power” (2007: 130). Under this assumption, the dominant society thinks that just by consuming the food, one is capable of fully appreciating the culture and experiencing the foreign. But when you eat at an ethnic restaurant as a diner, you are inherently in a more powerful position. You are served food by immigrants, you are not sitting down to share a meal with them, and you pick what you want to eat rather than being introduced to foods that your host feels represents his or her culture. In this position, the ability to truly experience the foreign is dubious.

Bost responds with a more critical approach in that rather than experiencing the foreign, the dominant society “(neo) colonialize[s]” Latin American food and food establishments. Playing off bell hooks’ book, *Eating the Other*, Bost states, by “transplanting the [United States and Mexico] border symbolically inside the United States...corporate culture disavows Mexican challenges to U.S. profits and national boundaries. The United States can then eat the other and keep its border, too” (2003: 513). Critical of the dominant society and this selective incorporation of Latin American culture, Bost suggests that dominant society “consume only a limited fantasy of Mexico” (2003: 512) which “make light of the Mexican presence in the United States” (2003: 512). In further examination of hooks’ *Eating the Other*, Gaytán posits that dominant society’s desires shape the food chain and this “American market’ situates ethnicity “not as a central expression of heritage or culture, but instead as a ‘spice’ that accommodates the

‘desires’ of an Anglo customer base whose consumption practices are considered hierarchically distinct” (Gaytan 2008: 333).

“It is their *Antojo*”

In exploring these concepts during an interview with Ivan, the term “*antojo*” was emergent. His use of this word demonstrates this concept of tasting the “other.” Ivan used *antojo* to reference why “Americans” desire “Mexican” food. When I asked him why Americans do not specifically ask for dishes that he considered more traditional, like *yucca con chicharron*, he said, “Because Americans have *antojos* for specific dishes, like burritos or quesadillas, because they know what it is. It is their *antojo*.”

When I initially translated the word *antojo*, I used the word “craving.” But upon consultation, I discovered that *antojo* in this sense means “a whim.” To Ivan, the difference for Americans was this whim or impulse for a particular experience, for the preconceived notion of an imagined experience with this conjured up image of a static “Mexican” cuisine—a standardized whim or impulse desiring something they know, have had before, and desire to recreate.

But, how does that differ from a Mexican or Honduran coming into a restaurant with an “*antojo*” and ordering meat and corn tortillas? Is this desire for familiarity or for an illusion of a specific meal only unique to the dominant society? Ivan explained that for the Latino consumer it is not an “*antojo*” rather he claimed that it is both fundamental in that these are the foods most familiar to them. And, it is a process of conjuring up these images of home. Ivan stated that he makes almost exclusively Honduran food because most immigrants in New Orleans are from Honduras, and he makes those dishes specifically “so the people don’t miss their food.” Meanwhile, American customers

create these illusions of a specific culture. In this sense, this standardized image entails a romanticized notion of “authenticity” and is to satisfy their momentary impulse.

By examining multiple reviews on the Yelp.com and Urbanspoon.com, I was able to acquire a sample of the different interpretations of this notion of “authenticity” as determined by non-Latino reviewers. Reviewers were identified by their profile and only those with non-Latino sounding names attached to the reviews were selected. The potential fallacies within this process and the blatant ethnic profiling of these people are acknowledged; however, their responses are both interesting and relevant in that they demonstrate these mainstream, romanticized notions of “authenticity.”

Reviewers’ definitions of authenticity varied greatly, from the dishes served, languages spoken, décor, and even the music played at the food establishment. In a review about Los Paisanos, the critic said, “The gentleman behind the bar described the food as ‘authentically Mexican,’ saying that other New Orleans ‘Mexican’ restaurants were run by South Americans and didn’t cook authentic Mexican recipes.”¹⁰ Another reviewer claimed that because of the *telenovela* (Latin American soap opera) playing on the television and the “Latino songs” playing on the jukebox that Los Paisanos was “authentic” in that it “clearly caters to the Mexican immigrant community of New Orleans.”¹⁰

Regarding Taqueria D.F. on Claiborne Avenue, another reviewer said that it “is the real thing” because “there are always Mexican workers eating there.”¹¹ When suggesting that Taqueria Guerrero is “a quality Mexican restaurant” a reviewer stated that it is because of the “Latino staff, free chips and salsa, and other Latinos patronizing the business;” however, it lacked authenticity because it did not serve “margaritas or beer.”¹² A reviewer said that Los

Portales is a “very authentic” Mexican restaurant because “no one seemed to speak much English, and I don’t know Spanish. But that is a comfort at a Mexican place.”¹³

While these reviews must be read with some skepticism, they do provide insight into the ways in which the dominant society essentializes these complex Latin American foods as they produce their own idealized visions of this ethnic food culture. Looking at the actual food dishes, there is an overall disconnect between the perceptions of a static “authenticity” of what is considered the all-encompassing “Mexican” food and the realization of the actual fluidity and versatility of these diverse Latin American foods. As demonstrated throughout this research, like the people that introduce the ethnic foods to the United States, foodways are complex and evolving. Simply characterizing these foods as static using preconceived standardizations and by reifying migrant workers with broad generalizations fails to grasp the vast complexities that represent these individuals and their culture. In essence, with these preset notions of “authenticity” it is difficult to actually experience or taste the “other.”

IX. CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE

Accordingly, Ivan from Norma’s Bakery said that his ultimate goal is to have his own Mexican restaurant in New Orleans. When I asked him to describe this restaurant his response was surprising, in that, ironically, it was *kitschy* and seemed to be exactly what Bost argues is feigned “*jouissance*” with murals and sombreros. He described his restaurant as “authentic” and “typical.” When I asked what he meant by those words, he said it would “have Mexican waitresses dressed in the typical, colorful Mexican dresses” and the “tables would be decorated typically.” As he looked toward the ceiling glancing into his prefigured future restaurant, he said, “Colorful murals would be painted on the walls” depicting “landscapes from Veracruz,” and “on

the weekends a guitarist would play typical Mexican music; and a Mariachi band would play at times.”

Ivan’s restaurant vision could be a reflection of what he has learned in his ten years of experience working in restaurants in the United States. Perhaps he sees that décor and ambience as a way to appeal to the demands of the dominant society. Or, this description is his own version of “authenticity” created



Fig. 17. Taqueria Falcon at Night in New Orleans East

from his experiences working in his mother’s restaurant in Veracruz, combined with his work in restaurants in Alabama and New Orleans.

Nevertheless, the consumption of ethnic foods in this regard can be argued as a “subtle form of postcolonial capitalism” (Turgeon et al, 2002: 262) in that this ethnic food becomes commodified as the priority of these establishments becomes the profits earned by selling and heeding to the cultural ideas produced by the dominant society *and*, at times, the dominant consumer (the Honduran majority). The menus are tweaked to adhere to the perceived demands and appetites of the Honduran majority. And, *vis à vis* the kitschy décor and addition of chimichangas, restaurants cater to the dominant society’s standardized images of Latin American food culture.

Overall, the broader issue goes beyond unpacking words like “authenticity” and the varying levels of *kitschy* décor. It is more than simple restaurant reviews or menu comparisons.

The core of the argument is not that culture is completely lost because of the standardization of ethnic foods through static expectations and/or food inventions like the chimichanga. Nor is the argument that we offend ethnic groups through the use of generalizations and pan-ethnic terms like “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Rather, it is a critical, nuanced examination of the relationship between these complex groups and the dominant society. It is the challenge that Gutierrez presents of “making sense of this complexity (the Latino collective identity)” that is key. Rather than looking at the migrant populations as static and flavorless, society must recognize the need of a constant reworking and redefining the meaning of citizenship and address the complexities that exist within these migrant groups (Chavez 2008; Ong 1996).

Like people, ingredients and recipes will continue to evolve; society must create a more fluid environment that is willing to embrace these new additions. It is this process of culture-sharing and these negotiated interactions (in this case) demonstrated through the ethnic foodscapes which ultimately examine the ways these migrant workers define themselves and are defined by dominant society. As Olsson states, “Grits and fried chicken won’t disappear, but perhaps future southerners will enjoy them with a side of rice noodles or enchilada sauce” (2007: 56). Thus, food becomes a bridge for cultures to come together and to enrich one another, both individually and gastronomically.

As the trailer from Taqueria Falcon rests in the driveway of Cristina’s house in New Orleans East, we begin discussing the future of Taqueria Falcon. The conversation quickly shifts to her son who is a junior in high school and is one of the few youth members active with the Congress of Day Laborers. He comes to every Wednesday night meeting, offering his opinions, joking with the people, helping to prepare for meetings and events, and even sneaking extra plates of food (catered by his mother and uncle) to feed his active lifestyle. At the end of the

interview, I complimented Cristina for raising such a great son. She said with laughter:

Yeah, but he says he doesn't want to work in the *lonchera*. He says that when he turns 18 years old, he will not be working in that *lonchera*. And I tell him, 'you better hurry up and keep studying so you don't have to work in the *lonchera*.' I tell him that I will teach him how to cook, and he says 'no, no.' I tell him that to scare him a little, so he won't do things illegal, like steal or sell drugs. So, if he doesn't want to study then he will have to work in the *lonchera*, but he says "no, but I want to study!" And I say, 'Good, look, that is good, but you have to keep studying,' I tell him. And he says he can handle it.

Cristina and her family made the journeys across the border to provide a better future and more opportunity for her children so they can make that decision of whether or not they choose to work in the *lonchera*. Anecdotes and transnational narratives coming from figures like Cristina, Ivan, Eusebia, and Santos are essential in demonstrating the sacrifices made and their distinct approaches at integrating into the cultural fabric and political structures of New Orleans. In an environment that is not always welcoming toward newcomers, it is the migrant workers' tailored approaches to culture-sharing, civic participation, and their own creation of identity and purpose that will lead to local and culturally appropriate solutions to increasing anti-immigrant sentiments. Accordingly, it is essential that the dominant society acquire an increased awareness of the societal structures that exist and embrace a more holistic understanding of the richness of these cultures.

NOTES

1. Economic crises in their homelands (devaluation of peso in Mexico; lack of jobs throughout Central America and Mexico) (Gutierrez 1996; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001); Civil Strife in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).
2. See consequences from NAFTA and Bracero Program. NAFTA was ratified in 1994 and created a “free” trade bloc between Canada, United States and Mexico with the goal of eliminating trade barriers between the nations. Rather than generate fair and free trade between the nations, the policies have instead enabled U.S. agricultural sectors to cheaply export corn, beans, and soy to Mexico, thereby taking away agricultural jobs from Mexican farmworkers. (Hing 2010; Gonzalez 2006; Gutierrez 1996); Bracero program which arguably fostered dependency of Mexican laborers especially agricultural sector. The Bracero program was implemented under Franklin Roosevelt in 1942 to replenish the workforce left absent by soldiers during World War II and, though it ended in 1964, both Hing and Gonzalez agree that it paved the way for the dependency of the United States on these low skill, low wage foreign laborers, especially in the agricultural sector (Hing 2010; Gonzalez 2006). And, as Gonzalez argues, the current use by the U.S. government of the “guest worker” program is merely a “euphemism” for the Bracero program through the prevalence of wage theft, long hours, inadequate conditions, unstable employment (2006: 80).
3. The exceptions to this were Taqueria Guerrero and Los Portales. Taqueria Guerrero was always too crowded at the times I went to talk directly with the owner. When I arrived well outside the lunch and dinner hours, despite marking a time the owner had just left for the day. I was able to get adequate information from the server. The food truck “La Chica Sexy Muy Buenos Tacos” eluded my efforts. Ironically my two encounters with this truck were on University of New Orleans’ campus (it was stationed there to feed the construction workers on Elysian Fields); however, I was unable to track it down for a formal interview. Los Portales was somewhat of an enigma. All three times I visited I had the same server who only spoke Spanish. I seemed to have some sort of impenetrable look about me or perhaps it was my Kentucky twanged Spanish that prevented any sort of rapport from happening. I only spoke briefly with the owner and the women cooking in the back. They were kind enough, but seemed to be hesitant to speak more intimately with a gringa. A potential solution to this would have been to go with Alfredo, a member of the Congress of Day Laborers. Next time.
4. In November 2011, gatekeeper and community organizer Dennis Soriano had to return unexpectedly back to Honduras to be with his family. Without his help, I do not know that my ability to access this community would have been possible. He had instant rapport with everyone he encountered. Not only did he enlighten me on every Latin American owned food truck in the New Orleans area, but also on the powers of collective action, patience, and the deliciousness of the *baleada*.
5. <http://www.yelp.com/biz/taqueria-sanchez-gretna>
6. <http://www.urbanspoon.com/r/57/1592052/restaurant/Seventh-Ward/Taqueria-DF-New-Orleans>
7. <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/telamar/Content?oid=1279115>

8. <http://www.urbanspoon.com/r/57/1497894/restaurant/Gert-Town/Telamar-New-Orleans>
9. <http://www.yelp.com/biz/taqueria-sanchez-gretna>
10. http://cuadernolatinoamericano.blogspot.com/2011_02_01_archive.html
11. <http://www.yelp.com/biz/taqueria-df-new-orleans>
12. <http://www.yelp.com/biz/taqueria-guerrero-new-orleans>
13. <http://www.urbanspoon.com/r/57/1616675/restaurant/Seventh-Ward/Los-Portales-Restaurante-New-Orleans>

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