Latino/a Immigrant Street Vendors in Los Angeles: Photo-Documenting Sidewalks from 'Back-Home'

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Abstract

Street vending in Los Angeles is reconfigured, organized, and supported through the daily practices of Latina/o immigrants. Vendors physically transform the streets into public markets, utilizing sidewalks, fences, walls, parking lots, and benches in immigrant receiving neighbourhoods in Los Angeles. Street vending, as the most visual occupation of the informal economy, vendors depend on their visibility to be successful entrepreneurs, while as immigrants negotiate on going surveillance and policing of their bodies by the state and its apparatus. In this paper, I explore how the informal landscapes inhabited by Latina/o immigrants can be better understood through a process of visualisation. It is my argument that through the use of still photography as part of the research process, we can comprehend more fully how Latino immigrant's racialized bodies and their use of public space are visual processes integral to the production of ephemeral street vending landscapes in Los Angeles.

Keywords: *Visual Ethnography, Street Vendors, Informal Economy, Informal Labour, Photo-Documentation, Latino Immigrants*

Introduction

1.1 Yadira, a Latina, immigrant street vendor, stands on a street corner in Garment Town, an immigrant-receiving neighbourhood in Los Angeles. Dressed in a long skirt, floral shirt, and a colourful apron, she sells homemade food from Oaxaca, a southern state in Mexico where a large percentage of the population is indigenous and mestizo. The food is a traditional tamale recipe (called 'tamales oaxaqueños') specific to Oaxaca; she announces it with one who possesses the traditional flare of the region, as most sellers do, though with a twist that is all her own. As she calls to the air, customers gather around the red grocery cart that has been adapted to serve as her vending stand. Her selling quickly transforms into other activities, such as reminiscing with an Oaxacan customer about their shared homeland, his experience here on 'the other side' ('al otro lado'), and finally, praise for her food. Yadira listens to her customer patiently, affirming and validating his statements as she tends to others and fills their orders. Like thousands of other Latino street vendors, Yadira's daily routine is reminiscent of vending practices borrowed from Mexico. Her style – represented in dress, behaviour, turn-of-phrase, and language – transforms the physical space that she occupies, the result of which is a representation of her Oaxacan culture woven into the fabric of this new landscape. It is in such daily rituals that Yadira and her counterparts transform the urban landscape of Los Angeles^[1] by carving out a 'place' for themselves on its sidewalks.

1.2 Most research on informal economic activity like this describes such vending as employment of last resort, the rationale for which is attributed to the barriers to formal employment that immigrants like Yadira face. It is as a consequence of these that they turn to selling their wares on the streets in order to survive, but it is also the case that Latino vendors in Los Angeles^[2] exercise agency and choice, not only in terms of their formal and informal employment paths, but also in reconfiguring the urban landscape as part of their economic strategies. In effect, the visual manifestation of these landscapes of informal vending encapsulated by those like Yadira are also spaces of cultural resistance whose goal is economic activity but whose effect is an informal, highly visual process of cultural transformation.

1.3 Visual-cultural transformations are one way of understanding vendor's motivations and the ways that they ply their trade. Both informal and as a secondary measure, vendors seek to reshape the space in which they sell, places and spaces that have often been neglected or abandoned by local or state agencies. While this practice of transformation is standard in the cities and towns from which these vendors originate, in Los Angeles their trade transgresses various space-use and health code ordinances. Local authorities charged with keeping the law do so unevenly and inconsistently, usually after protest from local business owners or residents; and it is these moments before and during the storm of enforcement that the space is even more dramatically transformed, as vendor's outsider status is once again confirmed by the re-imposition of their new community's standards.

1.4 In practice, these landscapes of informal vending are highly visual and particularized; the entrepreneurs like Yadira choose and utilize cultural and symbolic patterns from specific locales to establish a familiar, yet temporary landscape. Visibility, however, can be a double-edged sword as it makes them targets of enforcement in which they are customarily asked to move and, when failing to comply, then physically removed from the sidewalk. Furthermore, some street vendors pay 'rent' to local gang members who divert or regulate competition from other vendors, or who alert them when to the danger of being removed from the streets. These are welcome practices of informal regulation, but for the vendors there is also the cost of petty extortion and threats of coercion for non-compliance.

1.5 In this paper, I explore how the informal landscapes inhabited by immigrants like Yadira can be better understood through a process of visualisation. It is my argument that through the use of still photography as part of the research process, we can comprehend more fully how the ephemeral street landscapes of two districts of Los Angeles involve a process of racialization. I further explore how these landscapes of street vending are created, organised and supported through attention to the daily practices of the mainly

Mexican and Central American street vendors at work in immigrant receiving neighbourhoods in Los Angeles. In the following section, I undertake this by providing some contextual information relevant to the emergence of informal economic activity, with particular relevance to Los Angeles. This is then followed by an outline of the role of still photography in my research and to my method of inquiry more generally. In the next three sections are discussions of some of the salient points arising during the conduct of my research. I begin by considering the nature of Latino immigrant vending in Los Angeles, and then move on to consider the specific nature of street vending in two districts of the city where my study was focused.

Visible Informal Economies: Urban Street Vending.

2.1 Scholarly interest in the informal sector in both developed and underdeveloped nations arose in the early 1970s and has gathered pace during the following years (Gershuny 1979; Henry 1982; Leonard 1994; Marcoullier and Young, 1995; Portes 1994; Roberts 1994; Sassen 1989; Thomas and Thomas 1994; Portes, Castells and Benton 1989). The early studies in particular contributed to the understanding of informal economies in industrialized countries, but more recent studies have been more concerned with the emergence of the informal sector in the developing world. Several key issues pertaining to the importance of informal economic activity in industrialized countries were thus left unfinished. Key among these are questions of the functioning of micro-informal economic landscapes, their operation at street level and their means of production and reproduction. Furthermore, existing research largely neglects the emergence of landscapes of informal vending, while those that do pay attention to it are primarily focused on conceptualizing street-vending in Latin America as a socio-economic and political problem running counter to the modernization process, or in examining how states seek to incorporate and institutionalize such vending practices (Moser 1994; Portes and Tockman 1996; Rakawoski 1994; Tokman 2001). These policy-oriented studies then often offer 'solutions' focused on state-sponsored interests and regulations aimed at institutionalizing street vending, usually with a view to exacting and controlling revenue from the taxation of informal economic transactions (Cross and Morales 2007). Little attention has been given to the vendors themselves or to the processes through which they seek to carry out their business.

2.2 Recent scholarship has, however, begun to shift from this normative approach to the pursuit of an intrinsic understanding of the practice itself; that is, to an understanding of the role of state planning, investment, and international funding in shaping Latin American informal economies (Gasparini, Gutierrez and Tornaroli 2007; Biles 2009; Coletto 2010; Bromley and Mackie 2009; Schneider and Karcher 2010). These studies focus on the consequences of population growth in urban centers as large numbers of rural migrants moved into cities in the second part of the 20th century, which lacked the resources to integrate them into a productive urban labor force and which, in the process, fuelled an unprecedented growth of informal economies in urban centers in Latin America. In the United States, studies on the informal sector focused on its relationship to processes of economic globalization, such as flexible production, informal service sector work, and sub-contracted manufacturing. Each of these forces is said to have shaped informal economic practices in distinctive ways (Chen 2001; Harvey 1989; Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia 1989; Portes, Castells and Benton 1989; Sassen-Koob 1989; Taudt 2001; Thomas 1992, 2001; Tokman 2001). These studies further theorize that local informal economies are actually informal employment opportunities resulting from global economic and cultural processes, while immigrants seize these opportunities to participate as informal laborers (Taudt 2001; Thomas 1992, 2001; Tokman 2001). It is not clear, however, how these spaces are actually produced at the local scale (the street) and how immigrants actually seize 'opportunities' as informal vendors. Nor do such theories address how the informal economy is organized in the context of particular immigrant groups and how individual choices regarding participation in the informal sector are made. It is in response to questions like these that this paper situates its attention to the visual examination of street vending practices as a sustainable choice of employment of Latino immigrants that resist institutional regulatory efforts by the local state.

Informal Landscapes of Street Vending in Los Angeles

3.1 Street vending practices produce visible economic landscapes that, over the past two decades, have grown rapidly in most urban centers in the United States. The particular growth and visibility of street vending in Los Angeles can be attributed to the successive pulses of immigration to Southern California from the 1970s onwards. Although street vending practices are highly visible to the people who sell, shop, or live in Latino neighborhoods, these informal economic practices often remain invisible to large numbers of city residents living in non-Latino neighborhoods and who thus remain oblivious to their existence.

3.2 Understandably, the space in which these immigrant vendors practice their trade is racialized, which can be defined as a socially constructed process of categorical meaning directed towards one non-normative group by another or other groups (Omi and Winant 1994). For Latino immigrants, the construction of their racialized status as informal workers is accomplished by a combination of anti-immigrant laws, policies and public discourse that seek to impose meanings of belonging, citizenship, otherness and 'race'. Two good examples of this is the Arizona Senate Bill SB 1070, which was enacted in 2010 and which is among the strictest anti-immigrant laws enacted in the United States. This was then followed in April of 2011 by the state of Alabama imposing even more restrictive policies towards immigrants. In Los Angeles, Latino street vendors are often regarded as illegal vendors and/or illegal aliens regardless of their actual citizenship status, and such public narratives contribute to transforming Latino vendors into embodied representations of national anti-immigrant discourses. National and state anti-immigration policies and attitudes inform the way in which Latino street vendors are regarded by local-state agents and residents of non-Latino neighborhoods. It is representations of otherness like these that often render immigrants visible in public media yet confine them to invisibility on the streets, due to a long and complex history of heightened segregation of Latino neighborhoods in urban centers.

3.3 Local and state policy makers also perceive the work of Latino street vendors as an economic survival strategy, which is supported by the fact that Latino immigrants constitute the majority of the workforce in the low-wage labour sector. This further reinforces the public perception that Latinos are unskilled labourers, lacking in ability and, therefore, opportunity in the formal sector. However, as I have argued elsewhere, the picture is more complex than this allows and street vendors have a degree of agency in relation to their choices of employment (Muñoz 2008). For some street vendors, working in the street trade is often a choice of part-time employment to be combined with formal employment. For others, street vending is used as seasonal employment for extra income and for others still it is their sole income base. While no exact figures exist on how many Latinos are employed as street vendors either full-time, part-time or seasonally, conservative estimates put the figure at 10,000 on any given day in Los Angeles (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001).

Visualising Landscapes of Informal Street Vending

4.1 As the most visual occupation of the informal economy, street vending, unlike much other work within the informal service sector, takes place in public space, which culturally transforms the space within which these vendors work. It was the desire to give attention to these visual, observable manifestations of cultural transformation that my research involved the use of still photography. Over the last 20 years, a growing body of literature has highlighted the importance of visual methods in sociology and anthropology, and particularly the value of still photography (Knowles and Sweetman 2004). However, the way in which photography is incorporated into research is still hotly debated (Banks 2001; Becker 1974; Prosser 1998; Rose 2001). Germane to this is debate regarding the photographic image as a *central* research technique or as a *complementary* tool of inquiry (Emmison and Smith 2000; Wagner 2002). Gold (2007) in his study of immigrant communities includes visual and non-visual data as central in his

analysis (Gold, 2007) and suggests that, 'photographic methods and visual data can contribute to the refinement of general propositions about the behaviour of immigrant and ethnic groups as they adapt to new environments' (2007: 144). In doing so, he advocates a role for visual data in social research that situates it clearly within existing or mainstream research practice.

4.2 However, recent scholarship has critiqued attempts to integrate the visual into orthodox social science and suggests moving away from seeing the visual as a further means to capture and record data, towards its integration into a more complex, reflexive visual ethnography (Pink 2007, 2011; Rose 2003). Such arguments have become more influential in sociology and anthropology and although social and human geographers have analyzed the role of colonial photography, 'the 'visual' hasn't been analyzed in any sustained way in relation to geography as an academic discipline (Rose 2003: 212). For sociologists like Chaplin (1994), however, still photography is engaged in a critical process of knowledge production and not just as a methodological tool for recording data. Ethnography, as Pink elaborates (2007: 22), should thus move away from using the visual as another means of collecting data towards a recognition of its value more generally to 'a process of creating and representing knowledge that is based on the ethnographer's own experiences ... [visual research] does not claim to produce an objective account of reality but should aim to offer versions of the ethnographer's experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced'. The value of the visual, so stated, is therefore not just a matter of its ability to capture or record objectively existing data in visual form. Rather, the visual also becomes a complementary way of furthering understanding, one that derives this role from its value in constructing knowledge of the social world as a joint enterprise undertaken between the researcher and her respondents (Pink 2007).

4.3 To this can be added the importance of photo-documentation as a mode of visual representation whose functionality is to understand complex relational processes that are displayed in the same place, so as to make comparisons across time (Gold 2007). Street vending landscapes can be extremely mobile in nature, as vendors evade a city's code enforcers. Customers, friends of the vendors, and 'street childcare' are also part of this moving landscape. The purpose of photo-documentation is not to capture an objective reality existing at a particular moment, but rather to provide a subjective frame of the ethnographer's understanding of this 'moving' landscape. The ethnographer's photographic lens also has the ability to capture the signifiers in the landscape, as well as its ephemeral visual moments, where bodies become part of the landscape and then fade away as the vendors close down. Through visual images of the urban informal economy, researchers can 'read' the ways in which certain streetscapes reveal social, political, economic and cultural processes that actively change urban landscapes (Suchar 2004).

4.4 Recording still photographic images of the street vendor's landscape therefore helped me to understand their use of space and how this changes over time. Over a period of 3 years fieldwork, I recorded more than 4,000 images, starting out with a film single lens reflex camera and then upgrading to a digital one. These photographic records cover the morning set-up period through to the evening, when the vendors would pack up their wares and go home. These images were helpful in recording this activity since still photographic images are rich in detail that may otherwise be overlooked in the moment of research and observation (Matless 2003). In this way, I was able to create photographic records of how vendors set-up their businesses, undertook their selling activities, the type of customers they served, the busiest times, and how they utilized the built environment to aid their vending. Perhaps most importantly, I was also able to record visually the abundant mix of signifiers of economic activity and change at work in their informal economic landscape.

4.5 According to Flick (1998), photographs, in addition to being valuable sources of data, also allow a detailed recording of everyday life worlds by offering more comprehensive representations of lifestyles and social conditions. He adds that photographs can also capture and record complex scenes and processes, and that through still photographs we can gain a more in-depth knowledge of these conditions than is available to the human eye alone. For both practical reasons and as a method of creating records, photo-documentation is an important part of understanding, reading, and analysing the production of immigrant landscapes. In the case of Los Angeles, public space on the street is the site of economic activity and social reproduction. Immigrant's daily lives are lived and experienced in public spaces, and these often act as an extension of the private spaces of domesticity and home. It was for these reasons that photography played an important part in my research into the lives of Latino immigrant's attempts to exert their agency on reconfiguring public space on the street and manipulating the landscapes of informal labour.

4.6 Taking photographs in the field was, in most cases, also a bridge that connected the vendors and myself. The camera can become a means of co-constructing knowledge and while observing and documenting the vending landscape, I would also engage in conversation with the vendors. It seemed intimidating for them at first, as most did not allow me to take pictures, giving reasons that ranged from embarrassment to distrust. Nevertheless, as my presence in the areas became more familiar their embarrassment became less obvious and the vendors grew accustomed to seeing me walking around, taking pictures with my camera. This familiarity with my presence was often evident during those instances when I would take field notes without my camera and the vendors would ask me why I was not taking pictures that day. At other times I would assist some of the vendors in carrying out their daily economic tasks. The combination of participant observation and visual ethnography thus evolved into a symbiotic relationship of data collection that increasingly revolved around the taking of images as the basis for creating cooperation between myself and my participants.

4.7 This relationship nevertheless took time to construct. First, I familiarized myself with the area and the vendors. As well as a researcher, I was also a consumer in these vending landscapes and I am culturally and linguistically bilingual, speaking a Mexican style of Spanish and English. Although I have U.S. citizenship, I was raised in Mexico, so I have shared experiences with many of the participants in the study. Regardless of this shared nationality, gender, and experiences, I was always careful to incorporate reflexivity, positionality and situated knowledge into my fieldwork, standard practice in such interview-based and observational studies (Gilbert 1994; McDowell 1992; Katz 1994; Rose 1997). I reflected on the process of co-creating data in the field and became both part of the community and a researcher. The only real difficulty I experienced was specific to my gender and while I had great success in establishing trust and interviewing women street vendors, interviewing male vendors was altogether a different experience.

4.8 My personal background is inextricably linked to these women, as my grandmother was a migrant worker who crossed the Tijuana-San Diego border undocumented. She worked full-time in cannery factories in San Jose, California, and part-time as a fruit vendor. I remember accompanying her while she sold (primarily) strawberries in her Mexican neighbourhood. In addition, I grew up in Mexico where purchasing food from vendors was an everyday practice. I would purchase food from vendors outside my school, after church on Sundays, on holidays, outside clubs and bars, at the beach, and in the parks. Once I arrived in Los Angeles, I would purchase food from vendors on the street corner where I lived. I established a friendly relationship with some of the women vendors in my study long before I started collecting data for this study. I was considered a 'regular customer' by the vendors on my street who not only sold prepared foods, but also fruits and vegetables. This was an advantage when it came to interviewing the women vendors in Garment Town.

4.9 My ability to speak Spanish with a Mexican accent also facilitated interviews with Mexican street vendors. This was not entirely the case with vendors from El Salvador; because of this, it took me longer to establish trust with my participants from Central America. I had a couple of uncomfortable incidents in

which vendors from El Salvador who, after hearing me speak, accused me of collecting information for the police. It was only after I spent time as a participant observer that they participated in my study. In Melissa Gilbert's research (1994) she mentions that her research participants were all women, but that what set her apart was not gender, but her own privileged position as an academic. I would argue that in my particular case, as described in the earlier example, I did not feel that privilege set me apart from the women I interviewed, but rather ethnicity/nationality, given distrust between ethnic groups, one of which I represented in speech. It was the fact that I spoke Spanish with a Mexican accent that I feel brought to light the silent ethnic conflicts and sentiments that some Mexicans and Central Americans have in Los Angeles. This is similar to what Gillian Rose (1997) describes as how her middle-class English accent set her apart from her interviewee, who happened to be male and Scottish.

4.10 The sentiments are deeper than simple gender and ethnic differences, however; there are multiple, complex layers of historical experiences that shaped my research study of immigrant experiences in the settlement and transmigration processes. For instance, immigrants from El Salvador who migrated to the U.S. via a step-migration process often encountered difficulties in crossing the southern border of Mexico, where many immigrants suffered atrocities at the hands of Mexican officials and civilians. Also, the settlement processes in Los Angeles can be a point of conflict among Central Americans and Mexicans, since the majority of Latino immigrants who settled in the Los Angeles metropolitan area prior to the 1980s were predominantly Mexican. Hence, Central American's context of reception was, in a way, shaped by the existing, longstanding generations of Mexicans living in Southern California (Menjívar 2000).

Latino Immigrant Vending in Los Angeles

5.1 This research focuses on two street vending areas of Los Angeles: Garment Town^[3] and MacArthur Park, two neighborhoods in Los Angeles where hundreds of Latino immigrant street vendors sell on a daily basis. Most street vendors sell Mexican and Central American foods and wares that are both traditional and region-specific; they include herbs, fresh fruits and vegetables, flower arrangements, and new and used garments. Holidays, such as Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Easter, Christmas, and Halloween, along with other national days specific to the national identity of the vendors and their customers are an essential time for seasonal, part-time and some full-time vendors. Vendors also utilize the sidewalk as retail space for their products, where low-cost, temporary items (e.g. plastic crates, cardboard boxes, blankets) are used to construct mobile storefronts. Likewise, some vendors use the rear trunks of cars to sell hot food, a practice that yields certain advantages over selling in the street. For instance, a car provides mobility to quickly get away from the police or code enforcers. It also allows the vendors to sell in different locations, like when they park outside garment shops at different times of the day, like lunch and breakfast breaks, and then drive back to busy streets where, in some cases, customers are expecting them. Trunk vending also facilitates loading and unloading for the vendors, avoiding heavy lifting and public display. Perhaps most importantly of all, by selling from their car trunks vendors do not have to fight with other vendors over sidewalk space.

5.2 Street vending in Los Angeles is informally, yet systematically organized. These vending strategies counter myths regarding the loose, 'pop-up' occurrence of vending seemingly characteristic of unregulated spaces. The simplistic notion that vending is an unorganized economic survival strategy cannot explain the entire vending landscape in Los Angeles. In fact, vending organization differs at the block-level and gangs often control specific sidewalk territories. In these territories, 'rent' is exacted for using this space and for protection from business owners, neighbourhood residents, other gangs or code enforcers. In the two sections that follow, I discuss further the how street vending is organized in two vending landscapes in Los Angeles.

MacArthur Park

6.1 MacArthur Park, an active vending landscape in the city, located in one of the densest populated areas of Los Angeles.

McARTHUR STUDY SITE

MacArthur is a predominantly Latino (residential) and Korean (business) community. Currently, the area is a target for private development and investment and is quickly gentrifying; what once was known as a place with the highest murder rate in the city, is now an oasis for yuppies. This particular site hosted gang members, the homeless, drug dealers, and miqueros (people who sell work documents, or 'micas'); it was also home to unlicensed vendors in the 1970s and early 1980s.

6.2 In 2002, local-state enforcers, in collaboration with local business owners and residents fought to change the negative image of the Park. They sought to create a historical, passive, green space accessible to all. The city installed surveillance cameras to reduce and deter crime in the park and the area. This enforcement and surveillance program is part of a revitalization of the area by developers and business leaders, in partnership with the city of Los Angeles. In 2005, the park realized the most drastic crime rate reduction rate in the entire city. According to a police lieutenant^[4], in 2005 there was only one arrest in the Park for public drunkenness. The redevelopment projects of the area are transforming the buildings into spaces for loft living, as can be seen in Image 1.1.

Image 1.1. Lofts, MacArthur Park

6.3 Although the neighbourhood might be predominately Latino, the street vendors who sell in and around the Park do not, for the most part, reside in the area. Some interviewed vendors travelled from as far as Southeast Los Angeles, a distance of about 15 miles, to sell in the Park on Sundays. Until 2005, MacArthur Park was a site for legal vending. Mama's Hot Tamales (see Image 1.2), a local restaurant and social service hub, was able to secure permits for street-vendors to sell in MacArthur Park.

Image 1.2. Mama's Hot Tamales in MacArthur Park

6.4 Unfortunately the programme was not renewed in 2005 due to a lack of operating capital. The sidewalks surrounding MacArthur Park, once crowded with vendors both permitted and un-permitted, now host greatly reduced economic activity. Once the permitted vendors were not visible, the un-permitted vendors became a target of the police and were quickly removed from the premises. Although the 'miqueros' and some un-permitted vendors still sell on the opposite side of the Park where the local stores are located, they no longer are part of the Park's economic landscape.

6.5 During the lifespan of the vending programme, the everyday landscape in MacArthur Park was quite different. Walking through the Park on a Sunday afternoon, the sensory landscape resembled that of the Historic Centre in Mexico City. There was a multitude of activities, people, noises, and smells bringing the Park to life. Latino families had picnics in the grassy area. The adults would sit on colourful blankets while the children would play within an eye's distance from the adults. Mobile vendors paced around the Park letting you know what they were selling 'tamales, tamales, tamales' out of their carts. The familiar bell from *el paletero* (ice-popsicle vendor) rang out, as he made his way around and inside the park while customers stopped him and searched inside his cold icebox to choose their *paletas de nieve o de agua* (ice pops made of ice cream or water). The paletero – usually a male gendered occupation – continuously rang the bell to draw attention of potential customers (see Images 1.3 and 1.4).

Image 1.3. Paletero in MacArthur Park

Image 1.4. Paletero in Garment Town

6.6 On the sidewalk that faces Alvarado Street, there were a series of un-permitted vendors who sold everything from second-hand goods to homemade candy. These vendors utilized the sidewalk as their display cases. The clothes and second-hand goods were placed on top of blankets; occasionally vendors would bring a homemade cart to sell candy, water, or fruit. The pedestrian traffic was dense; people walking on the sidewalk could be heard saying '*compermiso*' (excuse me) quite often, as the flow of people walked in both directions to gaze at the vendors and purchase goods from them. While walking one might get approached by 'miqueros' selling everything from driver's licenses to social security numbers or alien registration cards. Miqueros usually sell out of their car trunks, luring potential customers over for these covert transactions (see Image 1.5).

Image 1.5. Miqueros in MacArthur Park

6.7 The permitted vendors (during the period of legalization) had identical carts on one side of MacArthur Park. They looked organized and performed the rituals associated with selling their wares. Their carts were crafted and designed in such a way that the overall impression of the vendors resembled a Latin American plaza. In Image 1.6, a vendor cart sells souvenirs, inflatable toys, and beach balls.

Image 1.6. Permitted Vending in MacArthur Park

6.8 The traffic was always dense in the area, and people waited at the corner in large numbers to board public buses. Children played soccer, adults congregated, church members preached, and homeless people wandered. When the vending programme shut down, the permitted vendors were no longer able to sell in the park. Sandy Romero, the director of the programme and the owner of Mama's Hot Tamales, still encouraged them to work in the restaurant (located in front of the park) and prepare their tamales. Sandy provides them the kitchen and they sell their tamales on the menu and receive a portion of the profit. She also employs the *tamaleras* (tamale-makers) at the catering arm of her restaurant. However, some of the vendors have opted to sell their food on the streets in other areas.

6.9 As stated previously, once the permitted vendors were removed from the sidewalk in the park, the unpermitted vendors became an easy target. The police task force assigned to the park quickly removed the remaining carts and established a vending-free zone. Some of the vendors started to sell across the street, but ran into problems with the established businesses. Some vendors were not only removed by the police but were also given citations and even, in some cases, arrested (see Images 1.7 and 1.8).

Image 1.7. LAPD Enforcing Vending Codes

Image 1.8. Street Surveillance

6.10 The *miqueros* also crossed the street and now corner the market in the intersections across the street from the park. Sundays in the Park are now for the most part a recreational event, more than a swap-meet or public market. The changes are not a coincidence, given the systematic gentrification process that the area is currently undergoing. There is no space for the informal economy of the old MacArthur Park in this neighbourhood of trendy lofts, historic buildings converted to expensive condos and the slew of 'Urban Pioneers', young professionals, and the so called 'hip' residents that are settling and changing the urban landscape of the area.

Garment Town

7.1 The second area in this study, 'Garment Town', is southeast of Downtown Los Angeles. Not unlike MacArthur Park, Garment Town is primarily an immigrant community that, since the early 1960s, has been a place where Mexican immigrants have gathered, using it as their first point of entry to the United States. Situated east of the 110 Freeway and south of downtown, it is zoned for mixed use, though the garment industry (including sweat-shops) dominates the economic landscape. Mixed-in with the clothing shops and warehouses are Latino grocery stores, dry-cleaners, liquor stores, tax refund establishments, notary publics, immigration one-stop shops, and a variety of Mexican and Central American restaurants. In addition to formal businesses, there are a variety of street vendors that sell on the sidewalks, out of the trunks of cars, in parking lots, from grocery carts, and in fruit and taco trucks. Even without a formal

business license, these informal businesses are part of the thriving economic activities of this neighbourhood. They exist despite on-going police raids, protests by local business owners, and gang members collecting rent.

7.2 In this neighbourhood setting, vendors sell their products, customers consume, and vending landscapes are created, enacted, and performed in public space. In Image 1.9, the sidewalk has been transformed into a small public market comprised of 8-10 street vendors who are selling prepared food, DVDs, fruit, and plastic household goods.

Image 1.9. CD and DVD Street Vendors

7.3 The most popular way in which street vendors display and sell food in Garment Town is through the use of shopping carts. Karina, a Mexican street vendor, sells *tamales* out of her red grocery cart as detailed in Image 1.10. She describes her cart as functional by telling me, 'How else would I carry the food if I did not have this [the red grocery cart]?' She continues to explain how she has extended her cart by adding a blue plastic crate in which she keeps napkins, plastic forks, plastic bags, and cups. She also uses a patio umbrella to cover her vending area in order to provide shade or cover depending upon the weather, and importantly to increase her visibility to customers. It is for these reasons that the umbrellas used by Karina and the other food sellers are brightly colored and frequently used. Karina also carries two hot-containers in her cart: one red thermos that keeps the *champurrado* hot, and a large, metal pot in which she keeps the *tamales*. She also uses a black plastic crate to support the load, hanging additional plastic bags from the handles of the red cart. All in all it is a complex affair, as she seeks to maximize her visibility and thus her business, at a busy and popular intersection.

Image 1.10. Red Street Vending Cart

7.4 The sidewalks of these spaces of informal vending are thus often awash with the colour and texture of the vendor's business practices. The vendor's umbrellas in particular are a functional signifier in the vending landscape, their shape and colour not only a means of protection but also a way of informal and low cost advertising. The colourful umbrellas are a recognizable element in the vending landscape, serving to map out their patches, stake a claim and increase their sales. These umbrellas are not only a feature of the informal landscape of urban Los Angeles, but are common throughout Latin America as well. Vending spaces are certainly not uniform; rather, their specific manner enhances the vendor's practices, as Images 1.11, 1.12 and 1.13 demonstrate. As a practice and tradition brought with them from their homelands, the practice and manner of unlicensed street vending signified by the umbrellas is a recognizable one that transcends national and international borders.

Image 1.11. Street Vending Umbrellas

Image 1.12. Umbrella, Latina Food Vendor

Image 1.13. Umbrella, Latina Fruit Vendor

7.5 At first glance during a drive through Garment Town, it is not apparent that one is in Los Angeles. Although current and past representations of south central Los Angeles are often connected to Crenshaw Avenue (such as the 1992 Riots, low riders, and African Americans), this particular space of South Central is not in any way representative of mainstream imageries. In other words, representations of South Central Los Angeles, via Hollywood movies that are distributed not only in the U.S. but globally, assert and depict certain visual notions of what is and constitutes South Central Los Angeles^[5]. Yet, the reality of Garment-town is representative of what South Central has become over the past 20 years: an area of Los Angeles where ethnic business adorn the landscape (see Image 1.14; Image 1.14a; Image 1.14b).

Image 1.14. Ethnic Economic Landscape in Garment Town

Image 1.14a. Ethnic Economic Landscape in Garment Town

Image 1.14b. Ethnic Economic Landscape in Garment Town

7.6 Latinos in this particular neighbourhood comprise approximately 85.3% of the residents; 53.9% are foreign born and 80.8% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (U.S. 2000 Census). Thus, the commercial landscape in the area caters to the Latino residents. The residential streets are interspersed with small commercial locales that are zoned mixed-use, where light industrial businesses are allowed to exist alongside residential and commercial buildings. Amid single and multi-family housing, businesses, construction for a new high school, swap-meets, and garment factories, people keep their culture alive by keeping goats, chickens, and *gallos* (bred for cockfighting) in the backyards. The sensory landscape of the neighbourhood is also heightened by the sounds of street vendors announcing the products they are selling.

7.7 The backdrop of the vending landscapes in the selected sites differed. Garment Town was nestled between advertisements targeted to Mexican consumers, such as Mexican music groups, low-cost calling cards to Mexico, money-grams, Mexican restaurants, and Mexican corner stores. In MacArthur Park, most advertising in the landscape was targeted at Latino immigrants (not at particular nationalities), though specifics were sometimes used. According to Oberle (2006: 150), who conducted a study of Mexican businesses and entrepreneurship in Phoenix, Arizona, advertisements in the landscape foster a sense of place. 'The use of names, symbols, décor, and store layout invoke nostalgic images of Mexico and serve as a useful marketing device'. In Image 1.15, there are advertisements posted on the telephone pole for a concert by Antonio Aguilar, an iconic Mexican singer, promoting his last CD (El Remolino) before his death on June 19th, 2007. Figure 1.16 displays a homemade advertisement promoting diapers. Finally, Image 1.17 shows sidewalk advertising for a local Mexican restaurant. As Oberle (2006) suggests, flyers, pamphlets, and advertising connects local Latino residents with services, entertainment, and other networks that serve the local Latino consumer.

Image 1.15. 'El Remolino' concert (poster add) for Antonio Aguilar

Image 1.16. Advertising selling 'Pampers'

Image 1.17. 'Comida Mexicana' advertisement on the side-walk

7.8 In addition to claiming and organizing vending space through visual signifiers, as discussed earlier, some vending areas are claimed, monitored and rented out to vendors by gang members. For instance, Ximena, a Mexican street vendor, tells me that she pays five dollars daily to gang members for protection and security whenever she sells in a specific block. It is unclear how many vendors pay rent to gang members, since it was a subject most vendors were not keen to talk about. Ximena, however, did disclose her arrangement with the local gang members that come by every morning to collect their money. The invisible presence of gang members is important in maintaining perceptions that the street is 'safe' for customers and for street vendors, some of whom consider that it is better to keep themselves 'safe' by being monitored by the gangs rather than the police.

Image 1.18. Street Vendors Pay Rent to Gang Members

7.9 A representative of the Los Angeles Police Department states that the rent that gang members charge the vendors is illegal and, indeed, it seems to constitute a form of petty extortion. And yet Ximena says that it is also a matter of convenience, since in paying 'rent' to the gangs it also helps her when the police raid the streets. Although street vendors do not often disclose the system gang members employ to gather information regarding when raids from the authorities will take place, in return for payment gangs organize lookouts to watch for the approaching authorities and inform vendors when there are conflicts with the police, a local resident, or a business owner from the area. Ximena tells me that she does not consider the gang members to be dangerous because she knows most of them from the neighbourhood. It is not entirely clear how, specifically, the gang members intervene on behalf of the vendors whom they protect; neither Ximena nor a supposed member gang who I got to know were willing to volunteer that information. However, a police officer from the Rampart police station stated that in some cases the gang members resort to intimidating residents and business members. Vendors like Ximena, who pay rent to local gang members for protection, illustrated how organizationally, vending practices in these neighbourhoods are layered with restrictions not only from the local-state, but also from the gang members who also exert control over the public spaces or sidewalks of the neighbourhood. Ximena's story describes the unspoken, informal street rules regarding *where* they can sell, *what* they can sell, and *how* they sell it. Based on understandings of these unofficial rules, vendors constantly recreate and reorganize vending to fit their own priorities and schedules.

Conclusion

8.1 Sidewalks in both Garment Town and McArthur Park are in part 'claimed' by vendors via negotiations of ethnic/nationality identities. Visual signifiers in the landscape are used to claims rights based on ethnicity and nationality in addition to providing marketing strategies for customers. As previously discussed, vendors systematically utilize displays of foods, umbrellas, and murals to visually claim rights to space based on national identities. Vendors selling with backdrop of murals that consists of Mexican flags, eagles, and of the Lady of Guadalupe are all symbols that represent Mexico and Mexican cultural and national identities in space. In addition, displaying national specific foods (i.e. Popusas from El Salvador and Tacos from Mexico) not only informs the customers what they are selling but also claims the sidewalk for a particular national identity. To this end, by reading the complex 'visual' processes of Latino immigrant street vending allow us to further understanding historical and contemporary spatial claims and settlement practices of Latino immigrants in Los Angeles.

8.2 Latino immigrant's racialized bodies and their use of public space are visual processes integral to the production of ephemeral street vending landscapes in Los Angeles. Through the use of photo-documentation and oral histories, this study lends credible evidence to highlight the ways in which street vending is practiced and is systematically organized in Los Angeles. The use of photo-documentation was imperative in reading the landscape signifiers and analysing the ways in which street vendors exercise agency in reorganizing public space for entrepreneurship practices. By employing visual field methods, this paper was also able to analyse (1) how street vending landscapes are organized, supported, and created, (2) the ways in which it follows culture and custom via Mexican and Central American immigrant influence, and (3) the ways that vendors negotiate spatial constraints in terms of state agents and gang members—who act and impose enforcements in relation to vending practices. In effect, these spaces represent cultural additions as well as resistance, the primary goal of which is economic activity, but whose effect is an informal cultural transformation. Though seemingly informal, the community is a complex structure that weaves itself into the visual public landscape and ultimately changes the space within which vending is performed.

Notes

¹In this sense, place, according to McDowell (1997), is enacted through social and cultural displays as well as interactions.

²Street vending has been described as a consequence of the waves of immigration from Central America and Mexico to the United States and Los Angeles in particular, waves that occurred from the 19th century through today. However Los Angeles' street-vending history has only been documented in the last 25 years.

³Garment Town is a fictional name I gave to a Latino immigrant-receiving neighbourhood in South Central Los Angeles. As one of the research sites in my study, I wanted to protect the exact location of street vendors who participated in this study.

⁴Lieutenant St. Pierre, Los Angeles Public Forum, 29.10.2005.

⁵Movies such as 'Boys 'n the Hood', 'The Brothers' and various hip hop music videos, to name a few.

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