

Food as a Method of Placemaking for Latin American Immigrants in the US South: A Case Study of a Neighborhood in South Nashville, Tennessee

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ABSTRACT

Diverse groups of immigrants from Latin American countries populate modern-day Nashville like many other urban areas in the US South. Since the 1990s, immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries have migrated in high numbers to the region, leading to the creation of terms like “Nuevo South.” In Nashville, Latinx immigrants have culturally expressed themselves through food and food institutions have acted as impetus for a sense of community. International grocery stores and cultural restaurants not only act as mediums to spread and establish a sense of culture, but also as places for communities to form and learn from one another while integrating into a new environment. This paper will examine existing literature on the recent influx of immigration to the US South and the expression of culture via food in immigrant neighborhoods. This paper will employ Karen O’Reilly’s 2012 definition of participant observation ethnographies and Mark Wyckoff’s 2014 definition of placemaking to analyze immigrant-owned restaurants and grocery stores along Nolensville Pike in South Nashville as places of community. This paper seeks to prove that these food institutions constitute vital methods of placemaking for immigrants in the US South.

Keywords: Placemaking, Nuevo South, Latinx Immigrants, Food Businesses, Nashville, Tennessee

acts as a “Third Space” for its patrons, a sociological concept dating to the 1990’s that depicts a space for “authentic interaction” outside one’s home, school, or workplace (Gutiérrez 2008, 152). According to one of the concept’s originators, Kris Gutiérrez, these “Third Spaces” can benefit one’s life and development in their two primary spaces (Gutiérrez 2008).

Additionally, this restaurant opened a more intimate window into the Latinx community and their cuisine for White people in the Los Angeles area (Molina 2022). As a result, this restaurant and other cultural food outlets may risk becoming whitewashed if they begin to pay more attention to the needs of their US-born customers who desire an Americanized version of Mexican cuisine (Molina 2022).

However, the primary message Molina (2022) is that the benefits to the community outweigh these risks when the entrepreneurs behind the business devote attention to authenticity and care for their culture. This authenticity can take many forms, such as culinary techniques and local or traditional ingredients, which draw both the migrant community desiring a taste of their native region, as well as American-born patrons seeking authentic Mexican food (Schifeling and Demetry 2021).

When considering the social and cultural aspects behind food in Tennessee, the immigrant communities in Nashville that have created thriving food businesses come to mind, especially in areas like South Nashville and West Nashville. Given that immigrant families more frequently report elements of food insecurity than US-born families, immigrant-owned food businesses in low-income neighborhoods have an amplified potential to affect communities and the sense of fulfillment gained from one’s diet (National Council on Aging 2024). These businesses come in the form of restaurants, grocery stores, and mobile food trucks offering cultural cuisine. In each variety, they constitute an essential mode of placemaking for foreign-born migrants in the Southeastern United States, commonly referred to as the US South. As outlined in Wyckoff (2014, 1), placemaking entails the creation of a “quality place” that is “safe, connected, welcoming, accessible, comfortable, [and]

In the book, *A Place at the Nayarit*, Natalia Molina (2022) recounts the history and impact of a Mexican food restaurant owned and started by a Mexican immigrant in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Molina (2022) recounts the rich history and triumph of this immigrant business, she notes how this place acts as a sanctuary from xenophobia and judgment and is a place to go to meet other migrants from a similar area in Mexico (Molina 2022). Moreover, a business like The Nayarit, owned by Natalia Barraza, can inspire other entrepreneurs to start businesses in migrant areas, food-related or not (Molina 2022). From an economic standpoint, the Nayarit also employs immigrants, which not only aids them in finding jobs upon entering a new country but can also aid in the sponsorship of undocumented immigrants who eventually desire citizenship (Molina 2022).

A space like the Nayarit provides an alternative to the dominant culture in the US—a place to go if one feels ostracized by the mainstream culture perpetuated by American society. For example, Barraza found that many people in the LGBTQIA+ community would frequent her restaurant and form relationships with the newly settled immigrant population, as its comfortable and accepting ethos transcended Latinx immigrants and extended its invitation to all community members (Molina 2022). In this sense, the restaurant bridges the gap between private and public spaces, creating a place where people can feel the values of a community away from judgment. While the restaurant certainly cares about its finances, the emotional value that a haven like the Nayarit can bring to its community often trumps its economic significance. In other words, the immigrant-owned food business

sociable,” in addition to “promot[ing] civic engagement” and “allow[ing] authentic experiences.” Wyckoff (2014, 1) offers context as follows: “accessible – easy to circulate within, along and between public places; comfortable – address perceptions about cleanliness, character and charm; quiet – unless they are designed to be otherwise; sociable – have a physical fabric where people can connect with one another.” Moreover, “safe” refers to physical safety while “connected” refers both to the “quality place’s” physical connection to people’s residences and to other quality public places (Wyckoff 2014, 1). Through research on immigration in the US South, immigrant food businesses throughout the US, as well as participant observation ethnographies of immigrant food businesses in the US South, this paper explores how founding food businesses can act as an integral method of placemaking for these communities.

The United States contains the highest number of immigrants in the world, and, as migrants travel to the country, they have formed rich cultural communities filled with people of similar backgrounds to themselves (Smith and Edmonston 1997). These two facts play into an immigrant community in the US wherein immigrants assert their presence in their new home by forming enclaves based on geographic and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, many of these communities contain cultural areas of commerce and gathering that serve not only to express their cultural background juxtaposed to the dominant culture but also to bond the community together over shared experiences and upbringings (Molina 2022). In addition to immigrant communities’ use of religion, architecture, and fashion as modes of cultural expression, food and culinary traditions play a pivotal role in bringing immigrant communities together, as well as sharing their culture with US-born individuals (Lemon 2019; Molina 2022).

While indigenous people, as well as Latin American and Asian immigrants, have populated some of the US South, the area garners a fraught demographic reputation primarily through the historical oppression of Black Americans at the hands of White Americans (Guerrero 2017). Chattel slavery of

Black peoples by White slave owners perpetuated inequality until the American Civil War (Blakemore 2020). In the US South specifically, this systemic oppression continued after the war through Jim Crow laws that alienated the Black population and made it difficult for them to vote and participate in society (Blakemore 2020). Consequently, anthropologists and geographers consider the geopolitics of this area to have acted within a Black/White “binary racial system” (Weise 2015, 16).

The past three decades have come with sweeping cultural change and a demographic diversification of the US South overall, thus broadening its food options and cultural modes of expression. As a result, studying the food cultures of immigrant communities in the US South will prove paramount to understanding their methods of placemaking, as well as their role in the city and region. To understand how food has come to play such an important role in the lives of immigrants in the US South during the twenty-first century, a background on both the area’s recent demographic changes and scholarship on immigrant food cultures in the US is necessary.

Immigrant-owned Food Businesses & The US South

Latin American Immigration in the Contemporary US South: Jim Crow–2010s

The reliance of the US South’s economy on agriculture predates the nation’s sovereignty and has continued into the contemporary era. Agrarian slavery set the foundation for an unwelcoming racial environment throughout the area via unjust treatment toward Black Americans. Slavery resulted in a racial hierarchy that prioritized White landowners who enslaved and denied the civil rights of Black people. Anti-black racism has pervaded the culture of the US South and shaped the perception of the region well into the twenty-first century. Literature has less frequently examined the treatment of more recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia, particularly their stories of racial discrimination and their attempts to assimilate

to a new environment in the US South (Guerrero 2017).

While the narrative of a Black/White binary ostracizes other groups from the cultural histories of the American South, the low volume of immigration in the US South relative to other parts of the country helps to explain this lack of a multidimensional perspective (Marrow 2011). Specifically, from the era of the US Civil War until 1990, the US South received less exposure to immigrants than any other area of the nation (Marrow 2011). In the 1990s however, various immigrant communities, especially Latinx communities, began to both immigrate to the US South in higher numbers and integrate their communities into the country (Winders 2011). These Latin American immigrants escaped countries dealing with political turmoil, lack of economic opportunities and violence (Montalvo and Batalova 2024). Regarding pull factors, the availability of jobs requiring manual labor, as well as social stability, motivated Latinx people to migrate to the US, while many also sought political asylums (National Immigration Forum 2019). During this period, the US South received the largest proportional population boost of Latin Americans compared with the rest of the country, with populations in states like the Carolinas, Tennessee, Arkansas, Georgia, and Alabama witnessing increases in this demographic by over 200% (Marrow 2011).

While the US South's Latinx immigrant population spiked in the 1990s, so did the overall foreign-born population (Marrow 2011). As a result of this increase in immigration volume, these immigrant communities new to the US South started to solidify their presence in urban and rural spaces politically, economically, socially, and culinarily (Winders 2011). According to geographer Jamie Winders (2011, 345), "U.S.- and foreign-born Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and other Latin Americans [started] buying homes, taking year-round positions, starting or bringing families, and establishing businesses, social networks, and political groups." In this sense, Latinx communities in the American South established long-term roots beginning in the 1990s and 2000s, leading to the culturally diverse communities of the twenty-first century. Consequently, research on immigration in the US South has increased dramatically since the

turn of the century, and scholars have begun to investigate the intricacies of daily life, as well as the trends of larger institutions in this area among non-Black immigrant, foreign-born, and marginalized populations (Winders 2011). This trend has expanded the scope of academic research on the topic and challenged the persistent narrative of a racial binary in the US South, as scholars analyze how Black Americans and White Americans receive, interpret, and racialize, foreign immigrant groups.

Since this influx of immigration, geographers have aptly labeled the US South the "Nuevo South," a contemporary version of the "New South," which, in turn, is a term used to describe ex-confederate states in the US South after the Civil War (Mohl 2003, 56; Stuesse 2016, 68; Guerrero 2017, 8). These scholars defend this label by citing the immense changes in immigration statistics and the resultant transformation of cultural minutia in society (Mohl 2003). Notably, 2001 marked the moment when the Latinx population surpassed the Black population as the second-largest racial group in the US (Mohl 2003). In the age of the "Nuevo South," various discriminatory patterns emerge with a different ethos than the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, including the scrutiny of undocumented immigration statuses and linguistic ostracism (Mohl 2003; Guerrero 2017).

In the introduction of *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*, US Latina/o studies scholar Perla Guerrero (2017, 9) relays the idea that the New South manifested a place where racial equity can be achieved superficially, while the "exploitation of those communities [of color], especially in the labor sphere" continued after the war. While the "Nuevo South" is an different iteration of the New South of the Reconstruction era, they are both predicated on the "exploitation of racial difference" for the economic and social benefit of people in power (Guerrero 2017, 180). Throughout this paper, the concept of "Nuevo South" will be discussed through the lens of Guerrero's (2017) definition in her introduction, analyzing its unbalanced social norms and superficial improvements over its predecessor.

Nashville, Tennessee

This paper will focus on Nashville, Tennessee, as a case study that examines immigrant groups in the US South and their expression of culture through food production and cuisine. Before examining Nashville's migrants' relationship to food, a background about the city's unique demographic makeup will provide necessary context. As Nashville has grown at one of the most rapid paces in the country throughout the past few decades, its culture has shifted in manners unique to its area, yet also indicative of trends throughout the US South (Frey 2012).

While larger metropolitan areas throughout the United States have experienced copious immigration from diverse sets of non-Europeans throughout their histories, these immigrants only began to migrate in high volumes to Nashville and cities in the US South in the latter part of the twentieth century

(Winders 2011). As a result, Nashville has been labeled one of the nation's "New Ellis Islands" (Hull 2010, 1). Therefore, the need to study immigrant neighborhoods in Nashville has only recently gained traction as academic literature journals have recognized these sustained trends (Winders 2011). According to the local newspaper, *The Tennessean*, the state of Tennessee has had the third-highest growth in Latinx population since 2000, and projections indicate that Latin Americans will comprise one-third of Nashville's population by the end of the 2030s (Gomez and Solano 2015). This paper will pose the questions: how have immigrant communities in Nashville begun to create meaningful quality places amid such rapid growth (Wyckoff 2014)? Are these places "safe, connected, welcoming, accessible, comfortable, [and] sociable," and do they "allow for authentic experiences" and "facilitate civic engagement?" (Wyckoff 2014, 1). How do they

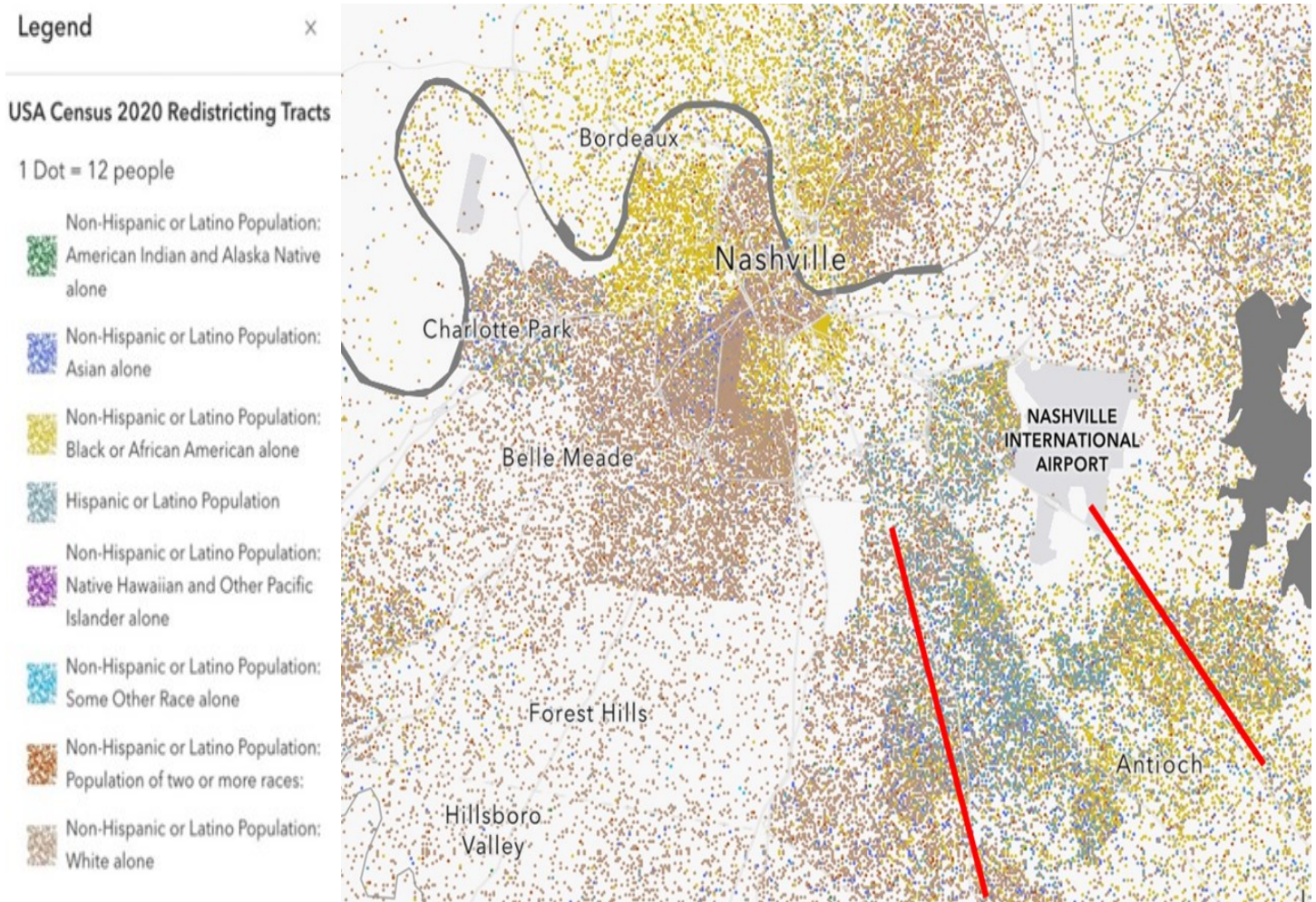


Figure 1: "Race and Ethnicity in the US by Dot Density (2020 Census)." Depicts the diversity of Nashville (Esri Demographics 2020). Outlined are the area between Nolensville Pike (left) and Murfreesboro Pike (right) that constitute "South Nashville."

compare to Molina's (2022) depiction of *The Nayarit* as centers for placemaking?

South Nashville contains the majority of the city's Latinx immigrant population in a vibrant community surrounded by many other immigrants. In this area of the city, census districts range from 6% up to 60% Latinx (Chaney 2010). According to geographer James Chaney (2010), immigrants living in communities like these sometimes rely heavily on their local area for their daily shopping and commerce due to differences in language and culture, as well as the threat of prejudice when venturing outside of their ethnic enclave. Therefore, thriving food businesses have the potential to create a meaningful third space for local migrant residents.

As well, local businesses in South Nashville (see Figure 1) represent institutional and organized modes of expressing the population's culture and creating a community, both integral aspects of adapting to life in a new country. Specifically, Nashville's immigrant entrepreneurs play a role in helping their community adjust to a new environment by providing services for the needs within their neighborhood (Hull 2010). Not only do these businesses provide food, but they also offer home décor and furniture, legal help, and emotional support via programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. Furthermore, these business owners have played a role in defending immigrant laborers and communities on a political level (Hull 2010). For example, in the late 2000s, several Latinx business owners and immigrant coalitions lobbied against a bill that would exclude non-native English speakers from participating fully in government (Hull 2010). While an examination of South Nashville at first reveals a distinct insularity, the immigrant groups that populate the area have affected many different social and political aspects throughout the city. For instance, immigrant food businesses act as a bridge to other demographic groups in Nashville, as they draw many people to South Nashville.

Not every Latinx immigrant had the funding or opportunity to start their own business, so many entered the labor force and affected the Nashville job market rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s (Winders 2011). As a result of

Nashville's booming tourism industry, the service industry necessitates many low-wage workers (Ansley et. al. 2009). Given the lack of organizations and unions available to many of these low-wage immigrant workers, migrants have protested for immigrant rights. The Immigrant Community Assessment of Nashville (ICA) has accumulated quantitative statistics and conducted qualitative focus groups specific to the city wherein the ICA found that, during the 2000s, unsafe and underpaid working conditions, as well as the discrimination of immigrant workers in Nashville, indicated a need for unions and government to intervene (Ansley et. al. 2009). Furthermore, efforts by immigrant-led groups such as Workers' Dignity support low-wage workers in Nashville (Nuñez-Chavez 2023). This group primarily aims to recover lost wages and money earned by low-wage immigrant workers from employers, as well as from landlords who have taken advantage of these groups (Nuñez-Chavez 2023). While this group's influence has grown, the volume of recovered wages produced by the group illustrates the need to support these laborers to an even greater extent.

Politically, many call for Nashville and Tennessee's demographic representation in government to represent the population more accurately and equitably (Crescencio 2022). For example, as of 2022, Latin Americans comprise 14% of Nashville, yet only one Latinx person holds a position of power in the city government, and only one Latinx person before her has ever sat on Nashville's city government (Crescencio 2022). Thus, while the immigrant population has worked tirelessly to integrate into a new culture throughout the past three decades, there remains room for local governments to encourage and enact more equitable representation, which can in turn help immigrant-owned businesses thrive and create quality places.

Conceptual Frame: Wyckoff's Placemaking and Food Businesses

Wyckoff's Placemaking

This paper examines the idea of placemaking for immigrant communities in South Nashville through the lens of one definition put forth by urban planning expert and professor Mark Wyckoff (2014). While this paper discusses in length four main methods of placemaking — including standard, strategic, creative, and tactical — it also outlines nine main “results” and qualities that ensue when a quality place is created. As stated earlier, these characteristics are that a place is “safe, connected, welcoming, allow[s] authentic experiences, accessible, comfortable, quiet, sociable, [and] promote[s] and facilitate[s] civic engagement” (Wyckoff 2014, 1). The list includes a caveat that the “quiet” tenet does not hold importance if the space is not designed to be quiet, so I have excluded this from my analysis. Moreover, since Nashville and the residents of these neighborhoods have integrated a mix of all four placemaking strategies, I decided to focus my analysis on the nine “results” of quality places rather than placemaking strategies; ethnographic methods can analyze these “results” more acutely than they can assess past placemaking approaches.

Wyckoff's (2014) framework has been mapped onto different cities attempting to boost tourism, make themselves more attractive to businesses and talented employees, and increase the interaction between their residents and nature (Brito and Richards 2017; Lew 2018; Mansilla and Milano 2018; Richards 2020; Fernandez de Osso Fuentes 2023). Specifically, these papers have cited events, event spaces, modern art, and green and blue spaces as methods of placemaking for cities and their residents attempting to adapt to the twenty-first century (Brito and Richards 2017; Richards 2020; Fernandez-Osso Fuentes 2023). In fact, Brito and Richards (2017, 3) cite Nashville as an example of a city that has boosted its tourism culture through placemaking and music events, branding itself as a “music cit[y].”

Therefore, it is especially important to analyze the concept of placemaking in Nashville

due to its potential to affect the city's many diverse communities in various ways. The dichotomy of these two divergent communities can illuminate the potential for the concept of placemaking to be mapped not only onto dominant cultures that attract visitors but also onto marginalized populations attempting to create quality places for themselves in their new home. Wyckoff's (2014) definition of the term will not only inform the analyses outlined in this paper, but my ethnographies of South Nashville can also inform future scholarship on placemaking's relationship to different communities. Given recent publications on placemaking and event spaces, as well as placemaking and mental health through green spaces, I expect food businesses to act as a quintessential mode of placemaking given their ability to foster local events for the community and improve mental health through authentic tastes that remind migrants of home (Brito and Richards 2017; Fernandez de Osso Fuentes 2023).

Opening Food Businesses as a Method of Cultural Placemaking for Immigrant Communities in the US

As a result of the fraught relationship between immigrants and food security, in addition to a desire to promote traditional cuisine, many have opted to open their own food businesses in immigrant neighborhoods, such as in South Nashville. These businesses take the form of restaurants and grocery stores, and scholarship recounts many perceived benefits to these communities, as well as to their respective cities and regions (Khojasteh 2023). For example, they create a place for people from similar cultural backgrounds to meet others and adjust to living in a new country together, as well as alleviate some of the problems caused by food inaccessibility.

Khojasteh (2023) outlines many benefits for the local food environment and cities due to these frequented ethnic food outlets. Through an economic lens, these businesses give entrepreneurs access to wealth and immigrants an opportunity for employment, in addition to increasing tax revenue for the city. Moreover, these businesses revitalize infrastructure in prime locations on main roads and aid in linguistic adjustment for many immigrant

workers. Most importantly, these places act as a social platform to meet other people in the area wherein they can discuss where and how to access services and adapt to a new environment. Socially, migrants can build networks among themselves here, but these businesses also act as a social bridge to other members of the community, whether US-born or not (Khojasteh 2023). From a placemaking standpoint, these businesses offer the ability to encourage connectedness, accessibility, and sociable atmospheres (Wyckoff 2014).

Ethnic Grocery Stores Challenge the Idea of Food Insecurity

In addition to the analysis of cultural food markets, Khojasteh (2023) argues that many community health and dietary benefits arise with these entrepreneurial ventures. Foreign-born individuals tend to use ethnic grocery stores and markets at a higher rate than US-born individuals. Consequently, their average food haul while obtaining groceries contains markedly more grains and fresh produce, and less than half as many saturated fats and added sugars (Khojasteh 2023). Therefore, these shops convert an inequitable food system into a health benefit for migrant communities, as their immigrant-owned ethnic food stores present healthier options than mass-market grocery stores (Khojasteh 2023).

Since immigrants and people living in low-income neighborhoods often eschew use of local mass-market grocery stores in favor of convenience stores and grocers located further away, immigrant entrepreneurs have altered this relationship by creating ethnic grocery stores that help foster a local community (Shannon 2014). The personal relationship that many patrons have with the owners or entrepreneurs of these stores, as well as the effort for authenticity put forth by these business owners separates their outlets from larger grocery corporations (The News Herald 2019). For example, Aurang Zeb of New York offers cosmetic and beauty products native to various regions of the world in his grocery store and has some of his items blessed to cater to his religious customer base (The News Herald 2019). Therefore, immigrant entrepreneurs like Zeb provide immigrant communities with an

opportunity to forge interpersonal relationships amid a strong community that can compensate for an often-negative relationship with the dominant food environment. As such, these businesses can represent safety and authenticity for their communities (Wyckoff, 2014).

Scholarship has also cited the ability of international grocery stores to connect people of races and backgrounds who otherwise would not cross paths (Yu 2022). Specifically, in the region of the Mississippi Delta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chinese immigrants opened grocery stores that bridged the tense relationship between Black and White patrons in the Jim Crow South (Yu 2022). Similarly, modern businesses like the Nayarit have created spaces away from the dominant culture where, for example, the LGBTQIA+ community can spend time with the Latinx community, embodying contemporary multiculturalism (Molina 2022). In other words, outside of creating a space for their community, immigrant-run food businesses can foster societal connections on a larger scale, bridging gaps between social groups burdened with a history of oppression (Yu 2022).

In addition to these societal impacts, literature on the subject reminds readers that these grocery stores sometimes serve cultural food products that appropriate and Americanize other cultures (Camilo 2012). For example, one grocery outlet in North Carolina serves bao buns, a Chinese food, with Korean and Vietnamese sauces to cater to the diverse enclave of Asian Americans living in the area, and to American taste buds as well (Camilo 2012). While this example may not be unique to the US South, it illustrates one type of adaptation that a dish may experience under its newfound geographic home.

The Intersection of Immigrant Food Cultures and the US South

Throughout the past three decades, the concept of immigrant food businesses has become a household notion in the US South. The idea has become so ubiquitous that residents of Lexington, Kentucky find themselves calling the area of town with

Mexican food options “Mexington” (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020, 295). While many of the immigrant-owned food businesses in the “Nuevo South” strive and brand for “authenticity”, their foods replicate but do not often copy the exact taste from their homeland (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020, 246). A possible reason for this could be the often-stubborn American palate that resists international tastes, a concept that makes Nashville’s thriving and diverse food scene different from what it may initially seem. In fact, many immigrant-owned restaurants attempt to “revamp” or “glamorize” their ethnic food options to cater to White American tastes, often begrudgingly (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020, 68).

Regarding the Latinx community’s relationship to food in Nashville, scholarship has only scratched the surface in analyzing this interdisciplinary topic (Winders 2011; Alcantara 2020). Winders’s (2011) research on Nashville and interviews with South Nashville immigrants have revealed that Latinx community members believe that long-time Nashville residents perceive South Nashville primarily as an area to acquire food (Winders 2011). In other words, food has become a part of the label that many people tag onto Latinx immigrants in Nashville due to the surplus of ethnic food options on Nolensville and Murfreesboro Pikes. The undesired marriage of these two concepts may exacerbate an existent economic need for immigrant-owned food businesses to cater to the dominant White American palate.

Methods: Ethnographies & Participant Observation

Before delving into the methods that I used, it is important to contextualize my experiences with background information about myself. I am a White man from New York whose ancestors immigrated to Brooklyn more than four centuries ago seeking economic opportunity and solace from religious persecution. On one side, my roots are Ukrainian and Jewish, while my other side is Irish Catholic and Italian. Despite my diverse roots, I lack a sense of belonging to anywhere other than the United States, more specifically New York. During my teenage years in one of Manhattan’s most

diverse high schools, however, I learned from the stories of my classmates, 40% of whom were first-generation Americans. During these formative years, I experienced these stories second-hand through my classmates, and while commuting through four different trains each way to school, I passed through many different immigrant neighborhoods. Moreover, I worked toward mastery of the Spanish language through my courses and weekly volunteering trips to ‘Spanish Harlem,’ acquiring a deeper appreciation for my peers and neighbors born outside of the country. As I describe my ethnographies below, it is important to understand the limitations set by my US-born background and how it affected my sense of place and belonging, despite my fluency in the language compensating for some of these barriers. Specifically, my perception as an outsider may lead some patrons and employees to change their habits, and my inexperience in immigrant-dominant spaces can lead to misguided observations on my part.

In addition to personal details, my work and volunteer experience in both the food industry and immigrant communities warrant a brief overview. Specifically, I worked in various roles such as a server and busser in a restaurant in Sarasota, Florida, for four years, meeting many migrant workers during my experience. I also worked on behalf of the Tennessee SNAP program during the summer of 2023, wherein I conducted research on the program and interacted with Tennessee government employees responsible for giving out SNAP benefits. While these experiences did not explicitly involve working with immigrant-owned food businesses, they allowed me to enter my ethnographies with auxiliary knowledge about the food system in the US South. Furthermore, my experience volunteering at English classes at a church in one of Nashville’s immigrant neighborhoods perpetuated my interest in immigrant stories and transplanted it onto a different region, culture, and landscape of immigration. Specifically, the stories that I encountered of Latin American and Middle Eastern immigrants at these volunteer sessions piqued curiosity in this research area and a desire for Nashville to set a more equitable path forward for its residents.

This study employs participant observation ethnographies conducted in Nashville to inform its research about the relationship between immigrants and food in the US South. During four separate trips, I visited various ethnic grocery stores and restaurants in immigrant neighborhoods surrounding urban areas (see Figure 2). Specifically, I entered many places throughout South Nashville along Nolensville Pike, including Latin American food outlets. As an anthropological study, a qualitative approach held more weight when collecting data. I chose participant observation as research method for this study because it allowed me to make the connection between person and place and more closely observe residents' relationship to their sense of place. While conducting surveys or focus groups may have offered more depth, they would have disengaged participants from their environment (Bryman 2016). Moreover, given the scope and short timeline of this undergraduate project, limiting this study to covert ethnographies alleviated potential scheduling conflicts and complications. These participant observation sessions came with limitations. For example, I was not able to ask direct questions to understand the patrons' and employees' perspectives on their own communities more deeply. However, taking four trips to this area of Nashville helped alleviate some of these challenges, as I attained a requisite sense of depth and a more enriched view of this area's culture after repeated visits.

Referencing literature on various research methods, including O'Reilly (2012), *Ethnographic Methods*, guided my trips and my subsequent analyses. For example, O'Reilly's (2012) emphasis on the importance of time influenced the volume of visits that I conducted, as well as urged me to visit the same institutions multiple times. And, most importantly, this literature review of ethnographic methods yielded advice for the field notes and photographs that I used as primary sources, notably emphasizing the balance one must strike between observing and note-taking, the difficult decisions that come with said balance, and the importance of taking notes that will translate well into a final paper (O'Reilly 2012; Taussig 2011).

While traveling in and out of multiple places

during each visit, I browsed through the aisles of grocery stores and interacted with the staff, including cashiers and other employees, to carry out transactions and learn about the store. In restaurants and markets, I often sat down to interact with the service staff and observe interactions taking place between the patrons. During these observations, I attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of placemaking for immigrant communities and how food businesses can contribute to this idea, while searching for Wyckoff's (2014) indicators of placemaking and quality places. While my observations act as standalone research to learn more about community formation of immigrant groups in the US South, they will also inform my suggestions for further research on the topic.

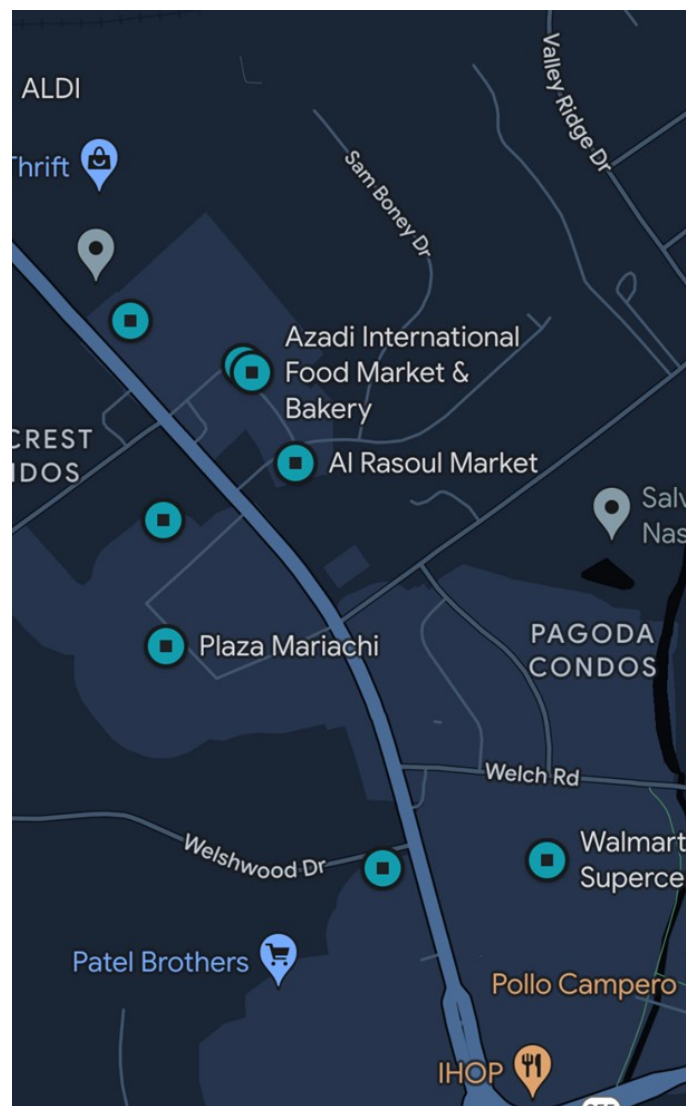


Figure 2: Google Maps screenshot depicting where re-search was conducted on Nolensville Pike (sites in blue)

Results

I trekked from the WeGo Transit Bus Route 52 stop uphill toward Plaza Mariachi, a popular location for the Latinx community in Nashville. In the parking lot, the shouting and panting of children dribbling through Chevy Silverados to play a pickup soccer game outside the Plaza caught my attention as their parents chatted with one another and cheered them on. As I walked by, I could hear one parent yell toward her son that it was "*la hora de comer*," or dinnertime. Upon entering the Plaza, the ceaseless sound of chatter throughout the large open space filled the ambiance, along with the television sounds of the NFL playoffs and the Nashville SC MLS game, as well as the thumping of cowboy boots. Immediately, I came to my first realization — that the pickup trucks in the parking lot, the American sports on the TVs, and the popularity of cowboy boots in the plaza represented part of the lived experience for Latin American immigrants in the US South. While their roots are Latin American, they now live in Tennessee, a central part of their identity. Yet, the copious food options, and the mariachi music that would follow tie them back to their Latinx roots. As Jamie Winders (2011) points out, these Latinx immigrants are actively changing what it means to be Southern – an idea supported by my ethnographies, as I observed the unmistakable cultural synthesis of these two groups at Plaza Mariachi. Here, I realized that the mingling of these two cultures transcends food and pervades many aspects of contemporary life such as sports, fashion, language, and transportation.

Not only did the hybrid nature of my experience embody the lived experiences of the people who own and operate it, but it placed importance on their cuisine as a mode of cultural expression (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020). In this realization manifests one of the tenets of Wyckoff's (2014, 1) "quality place" in that it "allow[s] authentic experiences." According to the Plaza Mariachi website, this food court area "exists to celebrate cultural diversity... [and is] a gathering place for all ages and all backgrounds to experience and participate in the beauty of international expression" (Plaza Mariachi 2024). The Latin American community created Plaza Mariachi to

build a platform to celebrate their own culture. This place represents an integral part of an immigrant's journey into their new home as they can acquire an organized sense of belonging despite being inequitably ostracized from other areas of society, such as in politics and the dominant food system. Having opened in 2017, Plaza Mariachi embodies the recent increased organization and commercialization of immigrant businesses in urban areas in the US South (News Channel 5 Nashville 2017). As the Latinx population has diversified from mostly adult males in the 1990s to families comprising people of many different ages today, the community has felt more empowered to create cultural hubs in this manner (News Channel 5 Nashville 2017; Winders 2011). Plaza Mariachi transcends just improving the foodscape for immigrants, as it hosts events for children, religion, and the arts, as well as second-hand markets (Plaza Mariachi 2024). Upon entering this rich cultural enterprise, I noticed how the community bonded over food as many families and friends dined in the large open space in the center. I even noticed one family eating different types of Latinx food from the different options in the plaza, but they were able to dine together due to the community-friendly open setup. My observations certainly aligned with Perla Guerrero's contention regarding the pervasive role of the family in Latinx culture after immigrating to the US South, as I saw many nuclear families (Guerrero 2017). The Plaza and its shopping center host outlets for Mexican, Peruvian, and Venezuelan food, among other cuisines. In its diversity of events, inclusion of various cuisines, and open-floor layout, the plaza epitomizes placemaking by being "welcoming," "accessible," "sociable," and "promot[ing] civic engagement" (Wyckoff 2014, 1).

Toward the end of my meal, conversations began to halt as the titular event commenced at the center of the main room. Soon, the five-part mariachi band started their first joyous tune that featured a harmonious mix of vocals and string instruments, complemented by one trumpet player. Before long, children stopped playing and adults stopped talking until the music ascended into the auditory foreground. The ability of music to catch everyone's

attention underscored the plaza's importance to the community: not simply as a place for acquiring food, but to share cultural traditions and bond as a community. This place feels "comfortable" for its consumers, as it offers an ethos of "character and charm," increasing its credibility as a quality place (Wyckoff 2014, 1). Most importantly, the plaza on Nolensville Pike is a safe space that acts as a haven from unfair treatment and the inequitable society that surrounds the community. In this sense, it also embodies Gutiérrez's concept of a "Third Space," as it offers the opportunity to interact and communicate more authentically with one another (Gutiérrez 2008).

In addition to Plaza Mariachi, I visited the Mexican restaurant Los Arcos and the food truck Chiqui Tacos. At these sites, my observations similarly aligned with the literature to an extent, while I also had unexpected encounters, suggesting a need for further research. As I walked into Los Arcos Mexican Restaurant at 11AM on a weekday, the hostess greeted me in Spanish amid a mostly empty restaurant save for a few patrons. Most noticeable throughout the restaurant was the distinctly Latin American décor, dominated by the Mexican flag and images of places in Latin America. As the group of waitresses realized that English would be my preferred language, they sent over the waitress with the most English fluency to greet me and take my order. While Plaza Mariachi provided a space for families to dine, I noticed that many solo parties entered Los Arcos seeking a sit-down meal. Not only do the immigrant-owned businesses on Nolensville Pike provide a space for families seeking community, but these spaces also serve as a place to take one's lunch break in the comfort of their native culture. In reference to Los Arcos as a quality place, it felt "safe" among all other attributes, as people most people dined alone (Wyckoff 2014, 1).

A short distance down the road sits Chiqui Tacos, a Mexican food truck parked in a semipublic space beside the local liquor store. The truck's mobile nature immediately "facilitate[s] civic engagement" through its ability to connect various areas of the city with one another (Wyckoff 2014, 1). With a Halloween-themed whiteboard menu and

makeshift tent dining attached to the truck, the effort behind this one-man business became salient throughout my experience. The truck radiated a conspicuous and pleasant aroma through the street, drawing me toward it with the smell of an eclectic mix of spices and sauces. While much of Chiqui Tacos seemed to fit seamlessly into the literature on the cultural Nuevo South, this specific iteration of the Taco Truck seemed more adapted to this community than Lemon's (2019), *The Taco Truck*, described. Specifically, with flat wheels dug into the ground and tables emanating from the side of it, this truck seemed more permanent than many of the California trucks that Lemon (2019) depicted. Lemon (2019) even describes trucks that oscillate between agricultural wine country and more urban spaces, while Nashville's truck appears stagnant. These discrepancies can be attributed to an array of possibilities, including a more hostile police presence or more restrictive laws in Tennessee that may limit access to public spaces. On the other hand, Nashville's Mexican population resides mostly in one area, while California's urban metroplexes contain different enclaves of Mexican populations (Esri Demographics 2020). Despite these initial takeaways, the intersection between taco trucks and the Nuevo South represents another area for further investigation, using the Taco Trucks' decades-long experiences in California as a benchmark.

Conclusion

During the 1990s, the US South began receiving many more immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East than previously recorded, a pattern that has continued well into the twenty-first century. Immigrants from all backgrounds have faced hardships since immigrating to the US in large numbers, such as scrutiny over immigration status, linguistic barriers, a lack of political representation, and the exploitation of labor.

One particularly pertinent aspect of adversity endured by immigrants today is inequitable access to food and groceries that comprise a healthy and affordable diet. While increasing equal access to food will prove an effective way to mitigate this issue, immigrant communities

have partially compensated for this fraught relationship to food access by founding authentic outlets for cultural cuisine. These enterprises come in the form of restaurants, grocery stores, and food trucks. Not only do these places act as spaces for immigrant communities to enjoy comforting food and for US-born locals to learn about the culture of their neighbors, but they are invaluable community builders. According to both contemporary literature and my observations in Nashville, immigrant communities use these spaces as gathering spots to help them adjust to a new country, feel more at home, and forge invaluable connections. Although Nashville hosts a diverse array of immigrants from all over the world, Latin American communities have built an especially high number of these institutions on Nolensville Pike where I conducted observations in the Fall of 2023. After synthesizing the data from these ethnographies with the above literature review, it is evident that the founding of food businesses for cultural cuisine by migrants in the US South constitutes an invaluable mode of placemaking. Among other benefits, these spaces are “safe...welcoming...and facilitate civic engagement” socially, culturally, and economically, in alignment with Wyckoff’s (2014, 1) definition.

In addition to investigating the concept of placemaking, this research has helped to identify two areas where further study can be conducted in alignment with this trend. First, I believe that the advancement and Americanization of the taco truck business warrants further research, as my observations seem to suggest a recent advancement in this sector. While there exists literature on the phenomenon of the mobile taco truck, my research suggests that some trucks may lack ease of mobility and thus the spreading of culture that comes with it. Further study can prove especially important given that this facet of the immigrant food business industry has an elevated potential to act as a mode of placemaking for immigrants. Specifically, when a food truck can be mobile and occupy public and semipublic spaces, it can be “connected,” one of Wyckoff’s (2014) indicators of quality placemaking that South Nashville lacked relative to the other indicators.

Second, I believe that the interaction among international cultures and their respective immigrant-owned businesses across communities in the US South represents another area for further investigation. In other words, immigrant communities have developed vastly different yet intertwined businesses on the same street as one another in Nashville, and I believe the interaction between these communities deserves more research. While the broad scope of this paper likely categorizes it as a study on geography and diaspora studies, these areas for further study may fall within the purview of anthropology. However, I believe that scholars in geography, anthropology, and sociology can conduct the above next steps to complement this research.

The aforementioned factors embody a ubiquitous desire among Nashville’s Latin American immigrant population for the creation of quality places. In cities like Nashville, this desire can engender empathy from politicians and lead to more equitable representation across branches of state and local governments. Especially given the US South’s fraught history of racial divides, immigrant food businesses can encourage a path forward for the region defined by an urbanism of harmony and equitable cultural expression.

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