Food as a Method of Placemaking for Latin American and Middle Eastern Immigrants in the US South: A Case Study Examination of a Neighborhood in South Nashville, TN

By

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ABSTRACT

Diverse groups of immigrants from both Latin American countries and Middle Eastern countries populate modern-day Nashville in a parallel manner to many other urban areas in the US South. While these groups have experienced histories of oppression, triumph, expression, and assimilation throughout the country and across multiple centuries, the demographic characteristics of the US South are currently in an unprecedented state of flux. Since the 1990s, immigrants from Mexico and Kurdistan, as well as other countries have migrated in high numbers to the US South, leading to the creation of terms like "Nuevo South" and communities like Nashville's "Little Kurdistan." According to media scholar Claire Sisco King, Nashville's recent surge in white tourism and party culture threatens to consign racial minority groups to the peripheries of a perceived social hierarchy, making research on these communities especially urgent.

In Nashville, Mexican and Kurdish immigrants have expressed themselves through food, and food institutions have acted as an 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 low-income and immigrant neighborhoods throughout the country. Then, utilizing ethnographies of restaurants and grocery stores along Nolensville Pike in South Nashville, this paper will observe a myriad of immigrant food businesses. Through both research methods, this paper seeks to prove that these entities constitute vital methods of "placemaking" for immigrants in the US South, utilizing urban studies scholar Mark Wyckoff's 2014 definition of the term.

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2023, I worked on behalf of the Tennessee Department of Human Services aiding in the improvement of their delivery of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps), benefits to low-income individuals and families across Tennessee. During my experience, I primarily researched the intricacies of Tennessee's welfare and SNAP programs to inform my team of important trends, statistics, and developments in these social safety net programs. As I scanned the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) website one afternoon, I noticed one essential area for potential improvement in Tennessee's SNAP program: nearly 30% of "working poor people" in the state of Tennessee are eligible for benefits, yet do not apply for them or ultimately receive them (USDA, 2019). For my team seeking to improve the allocation and delivery of SNAP benefits, this statistic identified an area of focus: reaching more of the eligible population. However, one must first understand the reasons behind this lack of enrollment in SNAP before attempting to construct a resolution. Without the time to substantiate or research claims during that summer, I hypothesized that low-income groups in Tennessee had been partially fulfilled by their diets and foodscapes socially and culturally, if not nutritionally, and therefore did not enroll in SNAP.

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 attained from one's diet (National Council on Aging, 2024). These businesses come in the form of restaurants, grocery stores, and sometimes mobile food trucks offering cultural cuisine. While this project's scope is too narrow to prove a relationship between SNAP enrollment and the cultural and social fulfillment provided by immigrant food businesses, it will prove that immigrant food businesses constitute an essential mode of placemaking for foreign-born migrants in the United States Southeast region[1]. As outlined in a well-cited 2014 paper that attempts to define this concept, placemaking entails the creation of a "quality place" that is "safe, connected, welcoming, accessible, comfortable, [and] sociable," in addition to "promot[ing] civic engagement" and "allow[ing] authentic experiences" (Wyckoff, 2014). Through extensive research on immigration in the US South, immigrant food businesses throughout the US, as well as ethnographies of immigrant food businesses in the US South, this paper will demonstrate that 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 tended to form rich cultural communities filled with people of similar backgrounds to themselves (Smith et. al., 1997). These two facts serve to introduce the concept of 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 in the face of another 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

[1] Commonly referred to as the US South, this area includes states formerly part of the Confederate States of America like North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Arkansas

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 (Molina, 2022; Lemon, 2019).

The US South has remained insular to demographic change when compared to much of the rest of the continental US before the latter half of the twentieth century (Marrow, 2011). While indigenous people, as well as Latin American and Asian immigrants, have certainly populated some of this region, the area garners a fraught demographic reputation through the historical oppression of Black Americans at the hands of white Americans (Guerrero, 2017). Namely, agricultural slavery of Black people by white slave owners perpetuated this inequality until the American Civil War (Blakemore, 2020). In the US South specifically, these systemic inequalities 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, many scholars consider the geopolitics of this area to have acted inside of a so-called "Black/white binary" (Winders, 2011).

Yet, the past three decades have witnessed sweeping cultural change and a demographic diversification of the US South overall, and thus a broadening of 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. Analyzing this social phenomenon in Nashville will act as a mode of understanding a group at risk of being minimized and relegated to the peripheries of society by the city's white party and tourist culture (King, 2023). 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Latin American Immigration in the Contemporary US South: 1990s – 2010s

The reliance of the US South's economy on agriculture predates the nation's sovereignty and has continued into the modern era. Therefore, agrarian slavery set the foundation for an unwelcoming racial environment throughout the area via unjust treatment toward Black Americans. As a result of the economy's reliance on slavery, literature has robustly documented the lives of Black Americans and white Americans in this region, citing the oppression of one group at the hands of another. In other words, plantation 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 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 racial 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, creating an insular atmosphere prone to hostility upon the arrival of newcomers (Marrow, 2011). In the 1990s however, various immigrant communities, especially and ubiquitously Latinx communities began to both immigrate to the US South in higher numbers and integrate their communities into the country in more organized manners (Winders, 2011). These Latin American immigrants escaped countries dealing with

political turmoil, lack of economic opportunities, and in some areas, violence (Lorenzi et. al., 2022). 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 asylum (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 increasing 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 scholar Jamie Winders, "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" (Winders, 2011). 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, funding and research on immigration in the US South have 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 immigrant, foreign-born, and marginalized populations (Winders, 2011). This trend has finally expanded the scope of academic research on the topic and devalued the persistent narrative of a racial binary in the US South, as scholars analyze how Black Americans and white Americans receive, racialize, and interpret foreign immigrant groups.

Since this influx of immigration, scholars have labeled the US South the "Nuevo South," a contemporary version of the "New South," a term used to describe ex-confederate states in the US South after the Civil War (Mohl, 2003; Guerrero, 2017). 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, including the scrutiny of undocumented immigration statuses and linguistic ostracism (Mohl, 2003; Guerrero, 2017). In the introduction of her book *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*, US Latina/o studies scholar Perla Guerrero relates 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 (Guerrero, 2017). While the so-called "Nuevo South" is an inextricably 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). In other words, the notion that a version of the US South can be completely "New," or "Nuevo" largely remains a mirage covered by a façade of oppression. Throughout this paper, the concept of "Nuevo South" will be discussed through the lens of Guerrero's definition in her introduction, analyzing its unbalanced social norms and superficial improvements over its predecessor.

In contrast with the Jim Crow laws of the post-civil-war US South, scholars have labeled the anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation "Juan Crow" in the wake of increased Latin American immigration to the US South (Lovato, 2008). In the Jim Crow South, as opposed to the

"Juan Crow South," legislative documents explicitly discriminated against African Americans and mistreated their race in the areas of schooling, voting, and other social and political institutions (Brown et. al., 2012). In the twenty-first century, while discrimination against Latinx immigrants certainly acted as an impetus for lawmakers to pass anti-immigrant policies, they refrained from explicitly mentioning Latin American people and Mexican people in law (Brown et. al., 2012). For example, Georgia enlisted the help of the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to help detain undocumented immigrants in their state and capital city, acquiring funding and personnel from the federal government (Brown et. al., 2012). Moreover, Alabama passed the "Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayers and Citizens Protection Act" in 2011, which primarily penalized third-party government institutions and private corporations for leniency in hiring and interacting with undocumented immigrants (Brooks, 2012). Specifically, this law obligated public schools and police officers to check the immigration statuses of people they encountered and banned citizens from helping undocumented immigrants (Brooks, 2012). Other states such as Georgia followed suit and passed similar legislation in the 2000s. Each of these policies enacted varied negative effects and externalities on the livelihood and comfortability of Latinx immigrants living in the US South.

Undocumented immigration statuses became another facet of the "Juan Crow" "Nuevo South" that would dictate the experiences of new immigrants. From a statistical standpoint, the nation holistically received a surge in undocumented immigrants between 1990 and 2010, yet Southern states received a larger volume of undocumented immigration than the rest of the nation (Stuesse, 2016). Economically, this vulnerability perpetuated their ability to be exploited by low wages without any power to respond (Stuesse, 2016). Politically, it allowed people in power to frame the issue of immigration as the source of other social issues, and to use harmful

language when referring to Latinx migrants. For example, a 2005 movement incited by Arkansas Republican Senator Jim Holt called *Protect Arkansas Now* dubbed these new Asian and Latinx immigrants as "invaders" and enacted legislation to halt immigration, which prevented the diversification of the state (Kirk, 2014). Socially, the status of an undocumented immigrant became a more important identifier than one's nationality when discussing Latinx immigrants in the US South. In other words, Black and white residents in cities like Atlanta racialized these groups not based on whether they were Mexican or Guatemalan, but legal or "illegal" (Brown et. al., 2012). This dehumanizing practice, in addition to general xenophobia toward their group and anti-immigration legislation, spiked in the years following the September 11th attacks in 2001, exacerbating this issue (Brown et. al., 2012). Specifically, legislative action taken against undocumented migrants surged in 2006, as 84 related bills were passed including the notably restrictive 2006 Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act and the 2011 Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act (Brown et. al., 2012). These laws restricted migrant workers from attaining a job without documentation, a restriction that was intensified by the 2011 bill that allowed police to verify the immigration status of people they suspected to be "illegal" (Brown et. al., 2012). In this sense, Undocumented Latinx migrants faced compounding obstacles in planting roots in the US South, especially in conservative states.

Reception of the Latin American Immigrant Population Surge in the US South

Within this new racial landscape, Latinx immigration interrogated notions of Southern identity. According to extensive research done in both rural and urban locations throughout the area, Black Southerners and white Southerners who had inhabited the land for generations reacted in contrasting ways to these groups (Guerrero, 2017; Mohl, 2003; Stuese, 2016; Zuniga

et. al., 2005). US-born individuals, despite granting some economic leeway, almost ubiquitously garnered social and political resentment toward this group. Even before the immigration spike at the turn of the century, Perla Guerrero cites Northwest Arkansas as a place of racial hostility upon the placement of Vietnamese and Cuban refugees fleeing communism and entering their community (Guerrero, 2017). Specifically, the white residents of this region employed a similar sentiment of racial hostility that they had held toward Black Americans and Native Americans throughout their history to mistreat and discriminate against new immigrant groups (Guerrero, 2017). Their methods of racializing these two refugee enclaves formed the basis for the discrimination of larger immigrant groups at the end of the twentieth century.

US-born people also racialized Latin American immigrants economically, citing their positive working qualities, which had pejorative implications on the Black Southerner population. As scholar Angela Stuesse argues in her 2016 book "Scratching Out a Living," the influx of immigrants from Latin America has served to exacerbate the racial dichotomy that places white people in elite and privileged positions and Black people at the bottom of the social, political, and economic hierarchy (Stuesse, 2016). Specifically, in the chicken plants of rural Mississippi, Latinx immigrants' novelty and hardworking demeanor made them a more valuable asset than Black Americans from the perspective of white employers, reinforcing their place at the bottom of this hierarchy (Stuesse, 2016). From the perspective of the white people in positions of power, their open-arms acceptance toward Mexican and Latinx immigrants sometimes excused racism toward Black people, and Black people thus resented the resultant discrimination (Stuesse, 2016).

In a different study conducted in Lexington, Kentucky, a similar pattern is recognized wherein Latinx immigrant groups are treated with hostility (Zuniga et. al., 2005). Possibly due to

racial resentment and a feeling of displacement, Black-on-Latinx violent crime spiked in this city in 1999 and 2002, concurrently with surges in immigration (Zuniga et. al., 2005). This 2005 publication theorized that the motive behind these violent hate crimes, as well as the rise in microaggressions, is twofold: a fear among Black people of losing jobs, and a fear of losing their place in the social order (Zuniga et. al., 2005). Where white people saw utility, Black people saw a threat, resulting in some Latinx immigrants being racialized more unkindly by Black Americans than by white Americans (Zuniga et. al., 2005). As the anti-immigrant Juan Crow policies of the 2000s took shape, they exacerbated this discriminatory sentiment.

Contrary to the anti-Latinx political legislation, some white and Black citizens began to respect these immigrant communities from a social standpoint as immigration volume increased (Zuniga et. al., 2005). In turn, immigrants and US-born city residents founded charities and non-profit organizations to support the region's growing foreign-born communities, particularly in the areas of schooling and housing (Zuniga et. al., 2005). In Lexington, young males comprised most of the Latin American immigrant population at the outset of the increase in migration, followed by a subsequent increase in females and children, as many men brought their families to the US after initial economic success (Zuniga et. al., 2005). Analogously, the white and Black reception of these immigrants softened as age and gender diversity increased and immigrant communities expanded their societal influence (Zuniga et. al., 2005). In response, Lexington's local city government created the Hispanic Initiative Network (HIN) to identify pressing needs in the Hispanic community and advocate for their resolution, which included technological and financial aid, English classes, and help searching for jobs (Zuniga et. al., 2005). Similarly, Latin American students in North Carolina during the 2000s have cited the public school system not only as being welcoming to immigrant students but also as trying to educate immigrant students

on Mexican life and culture at the request of parents (Marrow, 2011). Overall, despite initial animosity, state and local governments in the US South became more welcoming to Latinx immigrants as women and children began to migrate in larger numbers throughout the 2000s.

The Impact of Geography on the Lived Experiences of Latin American Immigrants in the US South

In publications on the Nuevo South, more examples of organized social programs such as charity organizations and inclusive school policies for Latinx immigrants exist when documenting urban spaces as opposed to rural spaces (Brown et. al., 2012; Stuesse, 2016; Zuniga et. al., 2005). This difference represents one of many ways in which the US South, a place notorious for its rural landscapes, racializes immigrants differently among urban, suburban, and rural settings.

In rural settings, immigrants chiefly targeted agricultural jobs at farms and chicken plants, like the majority of the Latinx population in the US South before the 1990s (Weise, 2015). This pattern of agricultural labor continued in rural areas during the subsequent immigration surge, as migrant workers entered a land steeped in the idea of seasonal labor and its resultant lack of job stability (Weise, 2015). Agriculture workers and employers were bound less by immigrant-related legislation, and the relationship that Mexican and other Latin American male laborers developed with their employers became much different than in urban areas. Specifically, farm owners would take on a "paternal" role in which they provided for the needs of their workers outside of a paycheck, a practice that took advantage of Latinx work by encouraging and obliging a sense of loyalty (Weise, 2015). Therefore, rural areas in the US South often created a more exploitative, yet family-based way of life for new immigrant groups.

In urban areas, Latin American immigrants formed dense homogenous communities with a different relationship to work, leading to intense political upheaval. These immigrants arrived in the 1990s to an urban political context where Black and white city residents were moving to the suburbs due to economic upward mobility and an upturn in the economy during the 1990s (Weise, 2015). As immigrant groups began to arrive, they replaced the resultant void left in low-income neighborhoods throughout the city (Weise, 2015). Not only did these immigrants arrive from Latin American countries, but they also came from other metropolitan areas in the US that had seen analogous immigration surges earlier in the twentieth century and were now experiencing a saturated labor market (Weise, 2015). Southern cities like Charlotte greeted the first wave of solo Mexican immigrant men with jobs in construction and manufacturing to boost the urban economy (Weise, 2015). In this sense, urban patterns of Latinx immigration in the 1990s – 2010s had a nationwide impact, as they filled economic and social voids throughout the country and within Southern cities.

As Latin American immigrants planted roots in Southern US cities, they also began to form communities in exurban and suburban areas outside the city with cheap costs of living, clashing with the cities' existing white residents. In the Charlotte metropolitan area, for example, the city's surrounding counties began to grow faster than the city center after the initial immigration boost (Weise, 2015). When urban populations expanded further into suburban territory as a result, city politicians and private corporations developed agricultural land outside the city center into dense neighborhoods with housing and commerce. For instance, old white homeowners in Nashville began to see their neighborhoods populated by Latin American immigrants during the 1990s and 2000s (Winders, 2011). For some of these residents, these neighborhoods had been inhabited by their ancestors and children, having accumulated

emotional significance over time (Winders, 2011). As a result of the significant changes to their neighborhoods, white landowners felt isolated and politically resisted these changes as a result (Winders, 2011). Over time, however, an increase in volume has obliged a sentiment of acceptance toward immigrants and new communities, as cities in the US South continue to urbanize and transition further away from an agrarian economy (Winders, 2011).

As dense Mexican enclaves have increased in population throughout the US South, immigrants have placed importance on a physical connection to their relatives and culture in Mexico. Specifically, bus services, companies, and informal organizations orchestrate trips to Mexico that take various routes throughout the US South and hold varying significance to immigrant families. For example, in Iliana Yamileth Rodriguez's article "Los Autobuses del Sur," she describes the network of immigrants in her family who reside in Atlanta, Houston, and Northern Mexico (Rodriguez, 2022). She lived in Houston, while one side of her family immigrated further to Atlanta, and her grandparents stayed in San Luis Potosí, Mexico (Rodriguez, 2022). Therefore, she had much use for the myriad bus companies run by Mexican American entrepreneurs that would make trips from Atlanta to Mexico City for example, with stops in Houston and San Luis Potosí (Rodriguez, 2022). According to Rodriguez, her experience was emblematic of what many migrant families experienced in the 1990s, and these bus routes played a pivotal role not only in the connection of migrants to their families but also in the transportation of migrant laborers from one area of the US South to another (Rodriguez, 2022). These immigrant-run bus routes and other transportation-related businesses helped connect growing communities throughout the region as the Latinx population of the US South expanded rapidly. Overall, geography has played a significant role in the patterns and experiences of recent Latin American immigration to the US South.

The Geographic and Demographic Diversity of Latin American Immigrants in the US South

Regarding demographic diversification, Latinx immigrants in the US South come from a range of countries and regions throughout Latin America, making their populations very diverse. In North Arkansas for example, the mass immigration of Mexican immigrants in the 1990s and 2000s followed the placement of Cuban refugees into the area during the twentieth century, slowly forming a diverse community in the area (Kirk, 2014). Following this stark change in immigration patterns, scholars started to investigate the rich cultural and geographic diversity of these newly forming immigrant communities. On the other hand, white citizens and politicians in Arkansas failed to acknowledge the benefits of this cultural diversity, instead racializing and grouping the new Mexican immigrants into the same "illegal" bucket as they had placed Cuban refugees before (Kirk, 2014).

In the Atlanta area, Dominican and Guatemalan immigrants came concurrently with the wave of Mexican immigrants into the US South, sometimes relocating from other US cities to find work (Brown et. al., 2012). In this city, the foreign-born population more than tripled between 1990 and 2010, with over half of this population identifying as Latinx (Brown et. al., 2012). Specifically, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Colombians all constituted over 5% of this Latin American population (Brown et. al., 2012). These Central American and South American immigrants faced an extra barrier to social integration, as they were stereotypically identified by politicians and employers as "Mexican" despite their unique backgrounds (Brown et. al., 2012). Since this surge, however, the notion that the social and demographic differences among Latin Americans ought to be celebrated rather than ignored has been popularized (Zuniga

et. al., 2005). As Latinx immigrants have infused their respective cultures into the US South through food, religion, and other means, US-born individuals have gained more respect for each immigrant's individuality.

Middle Eastern Immigration in the Contemporary US South

While scholarship about immigration in the US South has focused more on Latinx immigration than any other demographic throughout the past few decades, migrant communities from other areas of the world have contributed to the diverse contemporary culture of the US South. Specifically, Middle Eastern migrant communities from different countries have formed throughout the US South during the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Since Middle Eastern immigrants are often counted as white in US Census data, it is difficult to ascertain the population's exact growth across a timeframe of multiple decades (Zraick et. al., 2024). Moreover, much less qualitative literature on the topic exists when compared to the abundant reservoir of information on Latinx stories. Anecdotally however, people from across the continent of Asia have immigrated to the US in high numbers throughout the latter part of the twentieth century and into the modern day, forming communities in diverse areas of the country and experiencing racial discrimination (Manfield, 2019).

Regarding Middle Eastern, North African, and Arab immigrants, many North African immigrants came to the US South as early as the nineteenth century as part of the slave trade (Esber, 2012). Despite roots with such longevity, Arab immigrants have been the focus of less literature than other groups; however, some scholars have begun to study the topic qualitatively through interviews during the twenty-first century (Esber, 2012). Notably, researchers have ascertained that Arabs in the US South often wind up in the area due to a failed first attempt to

immigrate to the Northern part of the US (Esber, 2012). These immigrants then arrive in the US South through Mexico, Caribbean islands, or Southern US ports (Esber, 2012).

In addition to the lack of scholarship on Middle Eastern immigrants in the US South, their relationships to cuisine and food businesses have been studied even less comprehensively, especially in the US South. However, elements of Middle Eastern cuisine have become universally available for purchase in the United States, often in Americanized and generalized forms (Petzen, 2020). Specifically, Syrian hummus and Palestinian falafel have purported themselves to the mainstream of American cuisine, being adopted in many different forms (Nohr, 2021). During the 2010s for example, hummus producers in the US advertised the dish as an Israeli dish, despite its Arab origin, leading to controversy among Arab American and Israeli American chefs and business owners (Petzen, 2020). Therefore, stories of Middle Eastern immigrants remain inextricable from US culture, although they are often misrepresented or inauthentic. Moreover, this anecdote reveals how susceptible these immigrant groups are to being lumped together under one "Middle Eastern" label. As exemplified in the hummus controversy, the dominant US culture persistently fails to recognize the individuality and singularity of the diverse array of immigrants in the US from the Middle East. Perhaps, scholarship has struggled to study this population due to this lack of understanding. Especially when discussing food cultures, a lack of comprehension of the geography of the region can prevent an understanding of the unique cuisines and cultures that these communities have brought to the US South.

Middle Eastern Immigrants have formed various enclaves in the US South, notably Kurdish communities in both Nashville, TN, and Dallas, TX. Kurds represent the largest ethnic group in the world without a recognized state, and this distinction has carried over to the US

where censuses do not categorize them by their ethnicity, but by their home country (Arpacik, 2019; Abu-Nasr. 2015). Therefore, the Kurdish population in Nashville, while undoubtedly the most prominent in the US, has not been precisely computed by the US census but estimates have calculated around 15,000 Kurds (Arpacik, 2019). Similarly, some estimates suggest as many as 8,000 Kurds live in Dallas, TX, comprising a sizeable enclave as well (Manfield, 2019).

Although most immigrants throughout the US South have traveled for labor, opportunity, and economic conditions, many Kurds arrived in the US to flee hostile conditions in their home countries, and therefore often fit the definition of refugees as well as immigrants. For instance, the initial wave of Kurdish immigrants hailed from Iraq to escape the persecution of the Kurdish minority at the hands of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in the late 1970s (Arpacik, 2019). Kurdish immigrants continued to flee the reign of Saddam Hussein during the late 1980s and beyond, yet the most recent bump in Kurdish immigration came from scholars and people receiving funding to do research prohibited by the Iraqi government (Arpacik, 2019). Therefore, the Kurds in Nashville arrived for a variety of geopolitical reasons and represent an array of different areas throughout Kurdistan spanning multiple countries. As these people have traveled from the Middle East to Nashville, they have formed communities such as "Little Kurdistan" in South Nashville[2] and contributed to the growing immigrant population in the US South. In South Nashville specifically, they have chosen to reside adjacent to other immigrant communities, such as the largely Latinx neighborhoods that surround Nolensville and Murfreesboro Pikes (Esri Demographics, 2020).

The Kurdish population in Nashville has garnered widespread recognition from other Kurdish Americans, as well as an online presence illustrating the vibrancy of the community and

[2] The area of Southeast Nashville between Nolensville Pike and Murfreesboro Pikes hosts many of the city's immigrant groups and is commonly referred to as "South Nashville"

their free expression of culture (Thangaraj, 2019). Anthropologist Stanley Thangaraj interviewed several Kurds in New York City during the 2010s, and multiple revealed their desire to meet the Kurdish population in Nashville, as they not only celebrated various Kurdish holidays but represented a diverse array of political backgrounds and opinions from various areas of their homeland (Thangaraj, 2019). As exhibited in Thangaraj's research, the Kurdish community in Nashville is so prominent that many Kurds throughout the United States have crafted a dreamlike image of the community and hope to travel there (Thangaraj, 2019). Like the Latinx population in Nashville, Kurdish immigrants embody a sense of heterogeneity, hailing from multiple countries and purporting varying political opinions, yet they remain underrepresented in state and local governments in the twenty-first century (Sawyer, 2017). As of 2017, only one police officer throughout the Nashville department represented the Kurdish population, despite the high volume of Kurdish immigrants in the city (Sawyer, 2017). As the population grows into the 2020s, more government representation could play a pivotal role in having the voices of the Kurdish population more widely heard.

The different backgrounds of Kurdish immigrants have manifested themselves into diverse political opinions not only on Middle Eastern politics but also on US politics. Many do not identify as Democrats or Republicans when questioned about the two-party American system, as they tend to base many of their opinions on American politics around Middle Eastern foreign policy (Thangaraj, 2019). Moreover, many continue to involve themselves in Iraqi politics via remote ballots as in 2005, where some even felt that their vote contained more significance coming from the US because they were free to vote for their desired candidate without fear of political repercussions (Jubera, 2005). Overall, Kurdish immigrants in South Nashville contribute to the vibrant and diverse neighborhood, creating an attractive community

for other Kurdish immigrants and expressing their native culture more freely than they had in their homeland (Sawyer, 2017).

On the other hand, like the nativism faced by the Latinx population in the US South, the Kurdish population has faced similar government backlash (Sawyer, 2017). During the 2000s, President George Bush's "War on Terror" alienated Kurds, as his 2007 attack on the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) exacerbated many Americans' already-existent Islamophobia following the September 11th attacks in New York (Kaya, 2012). Since 2001, many Americans have associated Muslims with an ethos oriented toward danger and violence, leading to instances of Islamophobia and xenophobia in the years following (Maira, 2011). In South Nashville, US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained Kurdish refugees and immigrants during the Trump presidency, when many immigrants from the Middle East faced discrimination and immigration bans (Sawyer, 2017). Therefore, Middle Eastern and Kurdish immigrants have faced tangible and intangible obstacles while integrating into society in the US South. As they overcome these obstacles, food businesses represent one way in which these immigrant groups can form a community to support one another and introduce their culture to the rest of the population.

Immigration and Culture in Contemporary Nashville, Tennessee

Much of the remainder of 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. Nashville's exceptionally large Kurdish population necessitates a description of the geopolitical

background, as this demographic interacts with and influences other populations within the urban area. 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).

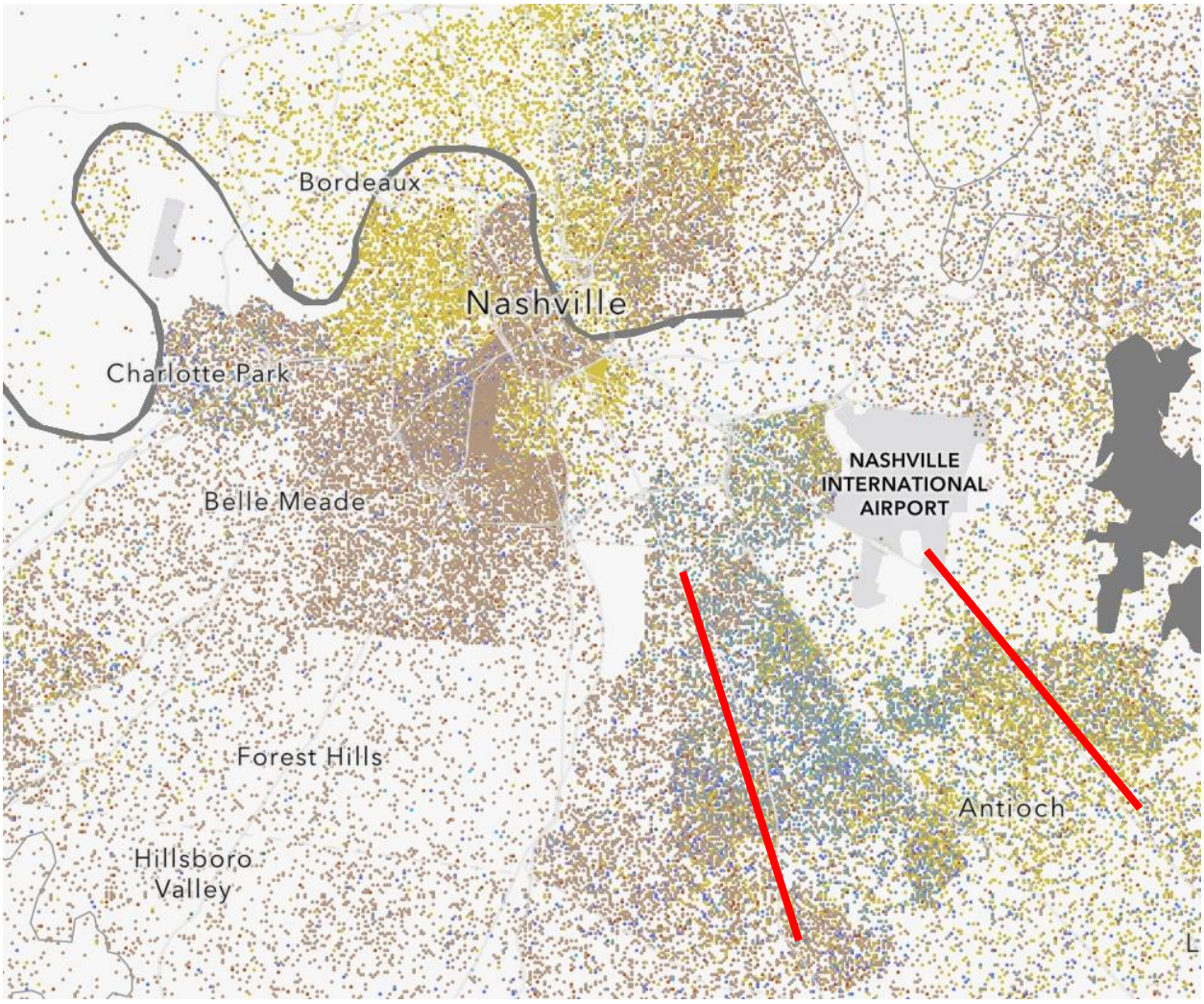
Since the 1990s, concurrent with the robust increase in immigration, Nashville's tourist industry has skyrocketed across many metrics, transcending its "music city" label to attract visitors with a diverse array of interests (King, 2023). Specifically, media scholar Claire Sisco King contends that bachelorette party culture in Nashville threatens to perpetuate hegemonic norms that cater to white women (King, 2023). However, as Nashville has accelerated in population and tourism, this party culture at the forefront threatens to relegate immigrant communities further into the periphery of a culturally diverse city. These immigrant groups who populate areas less frequented by tourists need to be studied more to ensure that the predominantly white tourist culture does not overshadow their essential role in the city.

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 of this trend, Nashville has been labeled one of the nation's "New Ellis Islands" (Hull, 2010). 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 et. al., 2015).

South Nashville contains the majority of the city's Latinx immigrant population in a vibrant community surrounded by many other immigrants (Chaney, 2010). In this area of the city, census districts range from 6% up to 60% Latinx (Chaney, 2010). Regarding this population, research has shown that immigrants in this area often refrain from interacting with those who reside in other parts of the city, as local businesses allow the area to retain a sense of self-sufficiency and a lack of necessity to venture outward (Chaney, 2010). According to geographer James Chaney, this trend manifests for a few reasons including differences in language and culture, as well as perceived threat and prejudice from local governments outside of their ethnic enclave (Chaney, 2010).

Local businesses in South Nashville 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 an outlet to service people's 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. As ethnographies will demonstrate later in the paper, the patrons of these food businesses often hail from diverse backgrounds.



Above is the "Race and Ethnicity in the US by Dot Density (2020 Census)" map which depicts the diversity of Nashville (Esri Demographics, 2020). Over the map, I have outlined the area between Nolensville Pike (left) and Murfreesboro Pike (right) that traditionally constitutes "South Nashville" (the darker shade of blue represents the "Asian" population, the lighter shade of blue depicts the "Hispanic or Latino" population, the brown dots represent the "white" population, and the yellow dots represent the "Black" population)

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 institutional organization and unions available to many of these low-wage immigrant workers, migrants have

protested for immigrant rights, and researchers have examined the landscape for immigrant work in Nashville via surveys (Ansley et. al., 2009). For example, the Immigrant Community Assessment of Nashville (ICA) has accumulated quantitative statistics and conducted qualitative focus groups specific to the city (Ansley et. al., 2009). In short, their findings during the 2000s include unsafe and underpaid working conditions, as well as the discrimination of immigrant workers in Nashville, indicating a need for more representation via unions and government (Ansley et. al., 2009). Furthermore, efforts by immigrant-led groups such as Workers' Dignity have begun the effort to 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 renters 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.

In addition to various economic influences, the Latinx migrant population has impacted and diversified the Nashville education system. As migrant laborers grew into migrant families, the school system marked one area where immigrants experienced a mutual cultural exchange with the extended Nashville community (Flores, 2021). As the influx of immigrant students into the Metro Nashville public school system lagged behind the initial wave of immigration, it took until 2015 for Latinx students to comprise 20% of the system (Flores, 2021). According to interviews conducted by scholar Andrea Flores, the entrance of Latinx and Mexican migrants into the school system helped alleviate an unwelcoming ethos toward immigrants that migrants had initially faced in the 1990s (Flores, 2021). From both a linguistic and educational perspective, the city has become much more welcoming toward immigrant families as the volume of immigrants has increased (Flores, 2021). Specifically, multiple immigrants that have

moved around the US have favorably compared Nashville to cities in other states such as Kentucky and Arizona, citing a more inclusive school system and less politically manifested xenophobia (Flores, 2021). Overall, Latinx and Mexican immigrants have played an integral role in the formation of Nashville's vibrant immigrant communities and businesses, yet they only represent part of Nashville's immigrant communities.

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.

While scholars have placed recent importance on studying the Latinx populations in the US South due to their ubiquitous presence in the region, not nearly as much literature has been published on the Kurdish immigrant population within the US South (Arpacik, 2019). As mentioned above, Nashville contains the largest Kurdish population in the US, and Kurds are a key stakeholder regarding any immigrant issue and debate in the city. This unique community in Nashville makes the city a suitable place to investigate the idea of inter-cultural influence and interaction. Since these communities live in overlapping neighborhoods, each demographic conducts business, works, and lives in the same area and therefore communicates with and affects each other (Esri Demographics, 2020). According to scholar Long Le-Khac, the rapid increase in the US population of both Latin American immigrants and Asian immigrants has interrogated the notion of group identity for these populations (Alexoae-Zagni, 2022). Literature

often omits the idea of intercultural communication and seldom contextualizes immigrant groups as part of a larger "panethnic" community (Alexoae-Zagni, 2022). In other words, the idea that each culture in the US is unique, yet they interact with one another is often overshadowed by grouping Asian Americans and Latin Americans together or focusing only on one group (Alexoae-Zagni, 2022). Even in the years since the pandemic, literature has preferred to separate these two groups and highlight their differences instead of foregrounding their influences on one another (Alexoae-Zagni, 2022). As this paper progresses toward presenting its research findings, the interaction between the Kurdish migrant population and the Latinx population will be examined.

Food Insecurity for Immigrant Communities Across the US

The first part of this paper analyzed immigration at first from a regional perspective in the US South, then from a local perspective as it pertains to Nashville, Tennessee. Through this literature review, sufficient background information on the immigration timeline and twenty-first-century immigration landscape in Nashville has been provided. Before primary research on food and immigrant communities in Nashville is discussed, some background on the literature's perception of the relationship between immigrant communities in the US and food is necessary.

Across the US, many Americans live in "food deserts," or areas deprived of sufficient proximity to grocery stores to maintain a nutritious diet at an affordable price (Rhone, 2023). Not only do Americans experience an inequitable geographic distribution of grocery stores, but some of them also live in "food swamps," or areas devoid of full-scale grocery stores but with access to convenience stores that offer snacks and unhealthy options at higher rates (Amegbletor et. al., 2023). In Louisiana for example, a 2021 study found that grocery stores overall scored higher on

various metrics of health than convenience stores, as did corporate stores over independent stores (Houghtaling et. al., 2021). A different 2014 study in Minnesota found that often, SNAP participants use their funds at convenience stores rather than grocery stores in low-income areas when compared with higher-income areas (Shannon, 2014). Additionally, some areas have seen a negative correlation between the number of small-scale convenience stores and the purchase of fruits (Peng et. al., 2019). As noted in a 2023 paper based in Tennessee, food security, as defined in part by access to full-scale grocery stores and small-scale convenience stores, acts as a primary determinant of health for many Americans (Amegbletor et. al., 2023). In short, a lack of access to a variety of affordable and dense nutrients will negatively affect people's health. Moreover, even if food remains accessible yet difficult to access, the extra effort that food desert residents exert in their quest for healthy and affordable foods reinforces this difficulty and often leads many people to purchase convenient unhealthy options (Amegbletor et. al., 2023). Scholars have extended this concept beyond food to dub certain areas "resource deserts," deprived of other vital determinants of health such as parks, as well as outlets for medicine and the practice of religion (Satcher, 2022; Tung et. al., 2016).

As of 2023, enough Americans wake up in food deserts each day for scholars and governmental agencies to define the issue as a "crisis," and there exist discernable and inequitable patterns that reveal which Americans experience this reality (Amegbletor et. al., 2023). Specifically, many low-income areas and areas populated by racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately live in food deserts and face inequitable barriers to accessing food (Amegbletor et. al., 2023). Specifically, the USDA considers various areas of South Nashville with high immigrant populations to be "low access" areas (Rhone, 2023; Esri Demographics, 2020). To exacerbate the issue, remnants of racially ostracizing infrastructure remain, especially

in the US South, acting as obstacles to food access for many urban residents (Satcher, 2022). The United States' immigrant population is comprised mostly of racial and ethnic minorities, and low-wage workers (Amegbletor et. al., 2023; Winders, 2011). Therefore, on average, foreign migrants disproportionately lack access to food across the US (Amegbletor et. al., 2023; Winders, 2011). In turn, diet-related health defects such as obesity, diabetes, and high BMI also affect this demographic at higher rates, in both adults and children (Amegbletor et. al., 2023; Mathieu et. al., 2016; Satcher, 2022; Tung et. al., 2016). Thus, immigrants enter the US with a fraught relationship with an inequitable food system, often obligating them to rely on their communities for culinary and dietary needs.

To combat food insecurity for marginalized populations, the US government has taken various steps and monetary precautions. For example, the SNAP acts as a social safety net entitlement program for low-income populations to access food. In 2019, this program doled out over 60 billion dollars in benefits to low-income families and individuals to buy food at eligible stores, the majority of which are grocery stores of varying sizes (Houghtaling et. al., 2021). While the program aspires to enable participants to eat and drink healthier, people who use SNAP benefits on average eat fewer foods recommended by the USDA for a healthy diet than non-participants (Houghtaling et. al., 2021).

While a lack of a nutritious diet for participants represents a problem for this governmental welfare program, a larger issue looms in the overall lack of participation in the program from eligible individuals. Especially in older populations, many eligible people do not take advantage of their SNAP benefits for a multitude of reasons. In 2018 for instance, 63% of eligible adults over age 50 who were eligible for SNAP did not utilize the program's benefits (Dean et. al., 2022). Besides a lack of knowledge about the program, immigrants in the US have

reported avoiding public assistance programs out of fear that it may affect their immigration statuses, as well as fear of being stigmatized as a cost burden to the general populace (Babey et. al., 2021). They often fear that they may be labeled as a public cost if their incomes stay low enough for eligibility for social welfare programs, which can unjustly affect their eligibility for citizenship (Babey et. al., 2021). In California for example, more than half of immigrants that claim to avoid public welfare programs experience food insecurity, exacerbating health inequities (Babey et. al., 2021).

While many struggle to receive and use SNAP benefits, access to food itself remains a more pressing and fundamental issue. According to a 2023 publication from *Public Health Nutrition*, transportation represents a crucial determinant of health in its relationship to food access, especially in rural populations (Park et. al., 2023). Moreover, Asian and Latinx people report an increased struggle in access to transportation when obtaining food in comparison with the rest of the population (Park et. al., 2023). Especially in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, which curbed transportation access, these populations struggled to leave their homes and purchase an adequate supply of food (Park et. al., 2023). In a similar vein, language barriers play an integral role in the hardships faced by migrant populations in the US when accessing food (Park et. al., 2023). Studies conducted in both New York and California illustrate these hardships; for instance, many immigrants who primarily speak Spanish and Chinese indicate that the language competencies of their grocers play a key factor when choosing where to shop for food (Park et. al., 2023). Simply put, non-native English speakers face added restrictions in shopping for food each week through language barriers. Similarly, many low-income immigrants choose not to buy groceries and opt instead to receive food through other outlets because of the expensive price of groceries (Tung et. al., 2016). Overall, immigrants face compounding

hardship in accessing food through a lack of access to adequate transportation, language barriers, and a lack of affordability.

Despite these barriers, qualitative data has demonstrated that immigrant populations indeed have a desire to overcome obstacles to obtain a nutritious and fresh diet, although the impediments for some populations have proved too burdensome (Berggreen-Clausen et. al., 2022). Specifically, one study cites that the most difficult barriers to overcome in the quest for a well-rounded diet are children's needs, transportation, and a lack of spare time (Berggreen-Clausen et. al., 2022). Due to systemic issues, many immigrants consistently lack a well-rounded diet despite their reported desire to eat nutritiously. This fact highlights the necessity to study these populations and their relationship to food, as it reveals that policy solutions have the capacity to enact a change in behavior for immigrants.

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. 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.

Until recently, many studies on this topic covered a case study of one business and how it impacts a community, or how it sustains itself (Molina, 2022; Lemon, 2019). However, in 2023

the Journal of the American Planning Association published a more comprehensive study examining the benefits of immigrant-owned food businesses in areas outside of dense urban centers, both from an intimate community standpoint and from a vast and scalable perspective (Khojasteh, 2023). Notably, it seems that in the urban community studied, which holds a similar relationship with Philadelphia as South Nashville does with Nashville both in demographic makeup and geography, surveys indicate that immigrants frequently use these food outlets (Khojasteh, 2023). Specifically, nearly as many foreign-born individuals shop only in ethnic grocery stores as shop only in supermarkets (Khojasteh, 2023).

Urban studies researcher Maryam Khojasteh outlines many benefits for the local food environment and cities at large 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 (Khojasteh, 2023). Moreover, these businesses revitalize infrastructure in prime locations on main roads, and aid in linguistic adjustment for many immigrant workers (Khojasteh, 2023). Perhaps most importantly, these places act as a social platform to meet other people in the area and discuss where to access certain societal needs and assimilate 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).

Finally, Khojasteh argues that many community health and dietary benefits arise with these entrepreneurial ventures (Khojasteh, 2023). As outlined above, foreign-born individuals tend to use ethnic grocery stores and markets at a higher rate than their US-born counterparts. 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).

Ethnic Grocery Stores Challenge the Idea of Food Insecurity

Since the relationship between immigrants and mass-market grocery stores has been labeled inequitable, immigrant entrepreneurs have altered this relationship by creating ethnic grocery stores that help alleviate this problem and foster a community. The personal relationship that many patrons have with the owners or entrepreneurs of these stores themselves separates these local food outlets from larger grocery corporations (The News Herald, 2019). Secondly, the effort often exerted to make customers feel personally welcomed and to offer a taste of one's home culture also achieves a purpose gone unfulfilled by larger companies (The News Herald, 2019). For example, one immigrant grocer Aurang Zeb of New York claims to import his items from all over the country in search of the most authentic Indian and Latinx food items for his international grocery store (The News Herald, 2019). Further, he offers cosmetic and beauty products from these regions and has some of his items blessed to cater to his religious customer base as well (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 existent food environment.

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). 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 racial groups burdened with a history of oppression (Yu, 2022).

Despite these positive aspects, 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; Esri Demographics, 2020). Therefore, while these grocery stores influence their communities in many positive fashions by popularizing and spreading cultural cuisine, fostering a community, and comforting immigrants, they sometimes risk compromising the authenticity of their cuisine.

Ethnic Restaurants as Community Builders in Immigrant Neighborhoods

In addition to grocery stores, many immigrant entrepreneurs in the US open restaurants for fresh cuisine in a more community-oriented setting. From a food perspective, many immigrant-owned businesses employ authenticity as a draw to their restaurant, which can take on an important role in the branding of their business (Schifeling et. al., 2021). This authenticity can take many forms such as culinary techniques and local or traditional ingredients, separating these businesses from American-born entrepreneurs (Schifeling et. al., 2021). In a similar fashion to international grocery stores, this draws both the migrant community desiring a taste of their native region, as well as American-born patrons seeking authentic ethnic food.

In one book titled *A Place at the Nayarit* by historian Natalia Molina, she 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 (Molina, 2022). As she recounts the rich history of the triumph of this immigrant business, she notes how this place acts as a sanctuary from xenophobia and judgment, and 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, a place like hers 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 just 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 safe 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. Further, this restaurant opened a more intimate window into the Latinx community and their cuisine from the perspectives of 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 of the book illustrates that the benefits to the community outweigh the risks when the entrepreneurs behind the business devote attention to authenticity and care for their culture.

Food Trucks and Food Labor Encourage a Close Relationship to Food for Many Immigrants

Another form of cultural expression through food in America is the food truck, which blurs the distinction between a public space and a private dining space. Specifically, Mexican immigrants have employed the food truck setting as a popular outlet for serving tacos given their handheld nature and their ability to be constructed inside of a small space. In fact, taco trucks have become such a cultural phenomenon in the US that geographer Robert Lemon wrote a book on the concept titled *The Taco Truck: How Mexican Street Food is Transforming the American City*, published in 2019 (Lemon, 2019). To begin the book, he conjures a metaphor to illuminate the impact that a taco truck can have on its community – that the taco truck immigrates to areas in a parallel manner to the immigrant communities it feeds (Lemon, 2019). In urban spaces in general, food seems readily available for the upper classes while the modes of producing said food happen behind closed doors in private spaces (Lemon, 2019). In short, Lemon argues that taco trucks realign the spatial hierarchy of urban foodscapes by forcing the consumption process onto a public space and the production process onto a semipublic space in the name of fostering a community (Lemon, 2019). In other words, these immigrant-owned food trucks not only help to create a space for belonging for migrants but also help to merge this space with the urban landscape and assert Mexican culture in public spaces (Lemon, 2019). Through the rapid movement of the truck across a city, any area can transform itself into a place for belonging and

a taste of home, while also reorienting the social norms of that area (Lemon, 2019). In this sense, food trucks constitute another mode of redesigning foodscapes in the US after immigration to the country, aiding in the creation of new communities and bringing a new culture onto the streets of US cities.

Lastly, many migrants have a strong relationship to food through labor, whether in the foreground of the process in restaurants and grocery stores as previously discussed, or in agriculture and meat packing. In her 2021 book *Meat Packing America: How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland*, scholar Kristy Nabhan-Warren argues that immigrant labor is responsible for providing food to much of the US (Nabban-Warren, 2021). According to quantitative surveys conducted throughout the twenty-first century, immigrants pervade each sector of the food industry and each step in the food system (Wald, 2011). Specifically, research from the National Agricultural Workers Survey and the Pew Hispanic Center reports that undocumented migrants comprise 27% of "food processing" labor and 12% of "food preparation labor," while three out of every four foreign-born farm laborers in the US is from Mexico (Wald, 2011). Whether food in the US is consumed at an immigrant-owned food business or elsewhere, it is vital to recognize the immigrant labor that invaluably contributes to each part of the food-making process in the US. According to a 2011 paper on immigrant food labor, this recognition has emerged as especially important in the twenty-first century as other issues regarding the American food system such as sustainability have recently drawn attention, threatening to marginalize the importance of immigrant food workers and research on their lived experiences (Wald, 2011).

As Nabhan-Warren examines meat-packing towns in rural Iowa, she notices the poor working conditions that pervade this industry (Nabban-Warren, 2021). When paired with the

performance of mundane tasks and the constant slaughtering of animals, the life of an immigrant food laborer can lead to an adverse relationship to both food and labor, despite the job security tied to such a role (Nabban-Warren, 2021). On the other hand, these work sites foster a setting where immigrants from across the globe can toil together with US-born workers to execute a job in close quarters, which in turn forms a closely-knit community (Nabban-Warren, 2021). As the relationship between immigrants and food labor continues to advance into the twenty-first century, this sector of the labor industry can play a crucial role in highlighting the working conditions of immigrants, and hopefully lead to an advocation for the equitable and fair treatment of immigrant workers (Wald, 2011).

The Intersection of Immigrant Food Cultures and the US South

While the concepts of immigrant-owned restaurants and grocery stores, as well as immigrant food labor, pervade the whole country, Nashville and the US South bring unique dimensions to the relationship between immigrants and food. In South Nashville's Kurdish grocery stores, for example, owners note that they import food and ingredients from Kurdistan to replicate the tastes in people's native land (Gomez, 2015). In this sense, Nashville's immigrant populations display a close relationship to their homeland. In a 2014 article from the *Nashville Scene*, journalist Jon Gugala depicts one street where five different shops sell a different version of the same food, the Middle Eastern gyro, each claiming superiority over the others (Gugala, 2014). In this manner, Nashville's unique relationship to immigrant foodscapes manifests itself in the city's substantial Middle Eastern population.

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).

Jamie Winders' intensive 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. In the same vein, literature notes that white-owned food businesses in the US South increase the credibility of their ethnic dishes by hiring people from the food's country of origin (Tippen, 2018). In short, US-born individuals in Nashville and the US South often attach labels to immigrants that relate to food, an extra barrier faced by many when attempting to adjust to a new country and culture.

Some Latinx immigrant families in Nashville have initiated grassroots movements to spread Latinx culture and cuisine throughout the city's schools (Alcantara, 2020). For example, in the 2010s, scholar Keitlyn Alcantara visited various schools around Nashville to make tamales, elote, and other Latin American foods from scratch with students, engaging them in stories about life in Latin America (Alcantara, 2020). An action like hers not only helps spread Latinx culture in Nashville's schools through food but unites a group of immigrants from all parts of Latin America, as well as US-born students, to come together over the authentic creation of a cultural dish (Alcantara, 2020). Alcantara explicitly mentions that the ingredients behind the dishes she made with the middle schoolers differ from the "USDA Food Pyramid," yet they hold significance due to the important stories behind them (Alcantara, 2020). Here, when discussing the development of children, she encourages readers to consider the benefits of attaining a balance of cultural knowledge and physical health through food, rather than solely prioritizing nutrition. Therefore, Nashville's migrants at once have a relationship to food that is unique, yet representative of other urban areas in the US South.

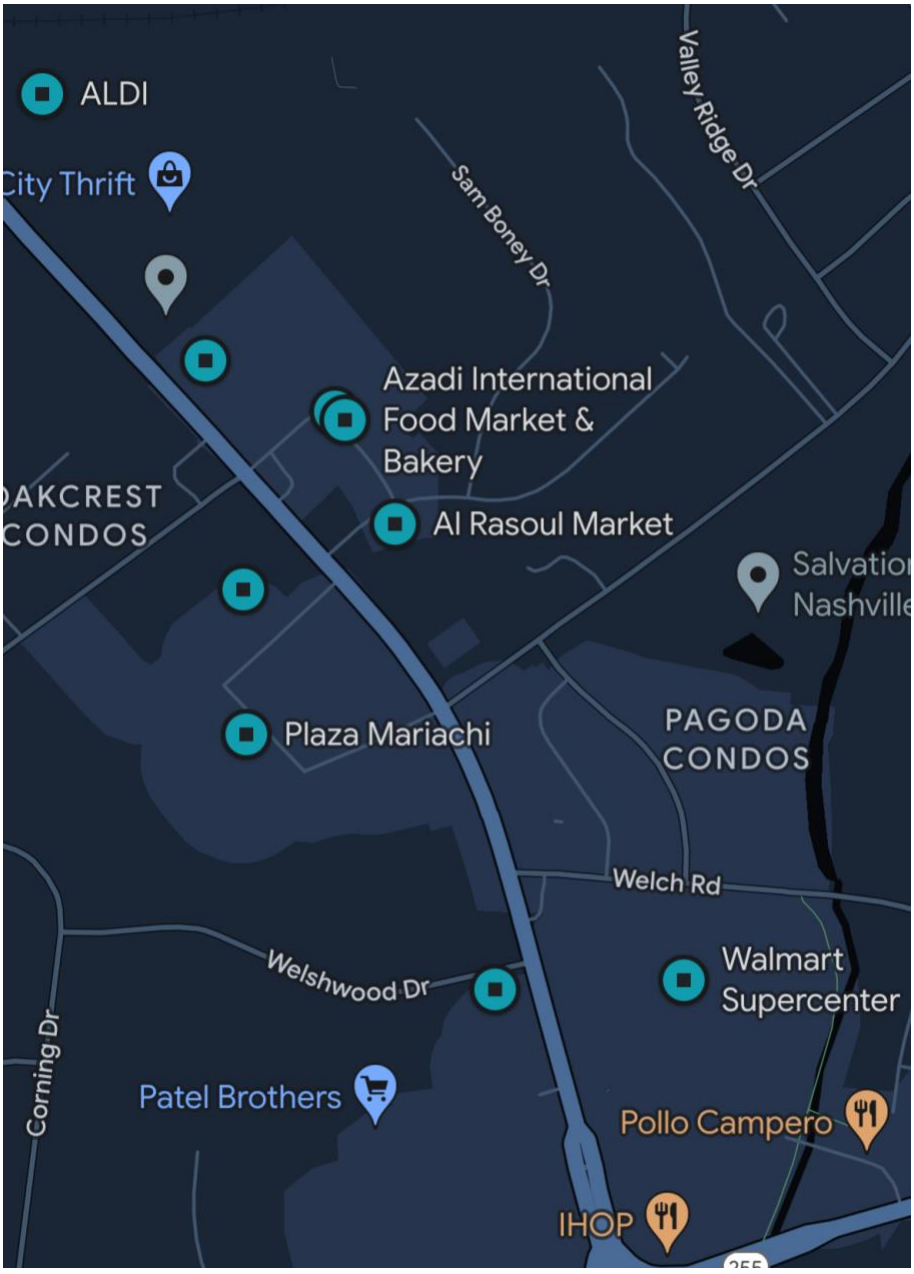
Throughout the past three decades, the concept of immigrant food businesses has become a household notion in the US South. The idea has become so ubiquitous that residents of Lexington, KY find themselves calling the area of town replete with Mexican food options "Mexington" (Agyeman et. al., 2020). 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 et. al., 2020). According to one urban policy expert, these foods they serve tell the story of moving and adapting to a new home country through hybrid versions that mirror the hybrid life of many US migrants (Agyeman et. al., 2020). Whether this be through altering recipes or sourcing ingredients differently, this version of immigrant-made food is perhaps the most authentic, reflecting not only the experiences of one's native land but of their lived experiences. Despite the often-stubborn American palate that resists authentic international tastes, places like Nashville, TN that have received copious recent immigration contain thriving and diverse food options. As the remainder of the paper recounts site visits to immigrant-owned food businesses in Nashville, TN, it will reflect on this concept of hybridity and all reviewed literature on immigration and food.

METHODS

This study utilizes ethnographies conducted in both Nashville, TN, and Tampa, FL to inform its research about the relationship between immigrants and food in the US South. During five separate trips – four in Nashville and one in Tampa – I visited various ethnic grocery stores and restaurants in immigrant neighborhoods surrounding urban areas. Specifically, I entered many places throughout South Nashville along Nolensville Pike including Kurdish and Latin American food outlets. In Tampa, I browsed multiple locations in Egypt Lake-Leto along North Armenia Avenue, a strip that mostly contains outlets for Latinx cultural cuisine. While the framework that I developed during my site visits in Nashville will dominate my research, my Tampa visits added variation to my perspective by representing a state with a different demographic makeup of immigrants and relationship to the other states in the US South.

During these ethnographies, I took field notes and photographs, which will act as primary sources referenced throughout the remainder of the paper. While traveling in and out of multiple places during each visit, I browsed through the aisles of grocery stores and interacted with the personnel including cashiers and other miscellaneous 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. Additionally, I noted if and how these immigrant-owned businesses have undergone recent changes, as much of the literature on the formation of the Nuevo South had been published before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. While my ethnographies 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.



Above is a Google Maps screenshot depicting most of the places where I conducted ethnographies along Nolensville Pike in South Nashville (sites highlighted in blue)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background & Context

Before delving into my observations, it is important to contextualize my experiences with background information about myself. I am a white man from New York whose ancestors immigrated to Manhattan and Brooklyn more than four centuries ago seeking economic opportunity and solace from religious persecution. On one side, my roots are Eastern European 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, and 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 percent 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.

In addition to personal details, my experience working in the food industry warrants 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, where I conducted research on the program and interacted with Tennessee government employees

responsible for doling 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.

While I grew a passion for immigrant stories during my high school years in New York, my experience volunteering at English classes at a church in one of Nashville's immigrant neighborhoods perpetuated this interest 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 a curiosity in this research area and a desire for Nashville to set a more equitable path forward for its residents. Upon matriculating at Vanderbilt University, located in Nashville, the culture of the US South immediately threw my sense of diversity off-kilter. Subway cars carrying fleets of passengers of many different ages, colors, and upbringings in harmony had been superseded by homogenous rows of cars and trucks strolling along Interstate 40 to reach their separate estates. Instead of weaving through diverse neighborhoods lined with immigrant-owned businesses during my walk toward downtown, I encountered mostly white tourists on party buses and "pedal taverns," donning cowboy hats and boots in an attempt to emulate the culture of a bygone era fraught with racial divides. While both Nashville and New York certainly have radii at the center of the city reserved for the upper classes, Nashville's sprawl dictates less interaction between the prevailing mainstream culture at the city's center and low-income neighborhoods on the city's margins. Therefore, low-income and immigrant groups in Nashville face a pressing threat of ostracism from the city's dominant culture.

While passing by the storefronts and perusing through the aisles of many immigrant-owned businesses along Nolensville Pike in Nashville, I noticed many areas of correlation

between contemporary literature on the Nuevo South and the physical setting. However, when I viewed several restaurants and grocery stores on a more intimate level for extended periods, I noticed some gaps in the literature and misalignments with what I had read, perhaps due to the immense changes that the area has undergone in the past decade. For example, the political constraints placed on immigration by the Trump administration from 2016-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of the gig economy, the growth of the US South, and a further increase in immigration all represent potential causes for minute and large-scale changes in these immigrant communities.

Ethnographies: Latin American Foodscapes in Nashville, TN

I trekked from the WeGo Transit Bus Route 52 stop uphill toward Plaza Mariachi, a famed gathering spot for the Latinx community in Nashville. In the parking lot, the shouting and panting of children playing 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 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, an inalienable part of their identity. On the other hand, the copious food options, and the mariachi music that would follow represent their Latin American roots. Not only did the hybrid nature of my experience validate the authenticity of this plaza as an embodiment of the

lived experiences of the people who own and operate it, a concept discussed in Agyeman's *The Immigrant-Food Nexus*, but it placed importance on their cuisine as a mode of cultural expression (Agyeman, 2020).

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). In alignment with much of the literature on the topic, the Latin American community created Plaza Mariachi to build a platform to celebrate their own culture. This place can represent 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 politics and the 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 the notion of 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. The Plaza and its shopping center host outlets for Mexican, Peruvian, and Venezuelan food, among other cuisines.

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 the 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 values and bond as a community. 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 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 11 AM 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. As the many waitresses on staff spoke among one another during the slow time of the day, I took note that Los Arcos mostly kept in line with literature from the 2000s and 2010s. However, I noticed one

group at the corner table that lingered for a long time after their meal, all while working on laptops. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant culture of online hybridity, these cultural food outlets have even more potential to foster a community for immigrant laborers who partake in industries that demand remote workers. Perhaps the people at this corner table were performing online work and decided to do it from a community-oriented safe space with easy access to high-quality comfort food. Whether or not this was the case, I believe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these spaces represents a strong area for more research based on my visit to Los Arcos.

A short distance down the road sits Chiqui Tacos, a Mexican food truck parked in a semipublic space beside the local liquor store. With a whiteboard menu and makeshift tent dining attached to the truck, the effort behind this one-man business became very salient throughout my experience. Moreover, the whiteboard menu contained fun and apropos Halloween-themed drawings, furthering the welcoming ambiance. Most conspicuously, the truck radiated a 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 Americanized and adapted to this community than Robert Lemon's *The Taco Truck* described. Specifically, this truck, with flat wheels dug into the ground and tables emanating from the side of it, seemed more permanent than many of the California trucks that Lemon described in his book (Lemon, 2019). Therefore, the intersection between taco trucks and the Nuevo South represents another area for further investigation.

Ethnographies: Middle Eastern & Kurdish Foodscapes in Nashville, TN

Before entering Newroz Market, I felt a distinct sense of place. Next door to the market lies a large mosque, and as I entered the market, a group of women exiting a Muslim service passed me in colorful robes as they spoke in a foreign language. While the shopping center that contains Newroz Market is primarily devoted to cultural foods, I attained a sense of culture through language and clothing before I even entered the shop. Unlike most corporate grocery stores in the US, Newroz Market allocated much of its limited space in the rear section for hot food and a small dining section. While perusing through the aisles, I heard the chatter of families enjoying a hot meal and was able to smell the cooked version of the foods that I had been browsing. Moreover, the sound of the workers conversing with the customers rose to the forefront of my attention, as the employees seemed part of the community, rather than a replaceable laborer employed by a large corporate grocery store.

In addition to Newroz Market, I visited Kurdish shops Azadi and Al Rassoul, and a restaurant named Edessa. Edessa served the Nashville community by offering sit-down restaurant service and an extensive menu filled with Kurdish and Turkish cuisine. Whereas Los Arcos's staff and customers seemed to be universally foreign-born, Edessa seemed to be filled with a diverse audience, and its ambiance catered to both immigrant and American patrons. On the back of the menu, Edessa outlines the history behind its name, tracing its roots back to a city in Ancient Mesopotamia, and explains their priorities: food that is "authentic, ingredient-driven, and fresh." Inside the restaurant, pictures of the Middle East contextualize the cuisine, while English descriptions of each menu item help an American audience understand the menu. Further, they offer parenthetical names for some authentic items to help an American audience even more, calling some foods "Turkish Pizza" and "Turkish Salsa," perhaps also representing an area of inter-cultural influence between the Kurdish and Latin American communities. As the

idea of a Mexican American restaurant has propelled itself to the mainstream throughout the past few decades, perhaps context has proved redundant, whereas Americans still desire an explanation for Kurdish cuisine. To understand the complex motivations behind these cultural explanations, it appears more research is needed.

On the back of their menu, Edessa reveals some historical and cultural context to their cuisine

Like Newroz Market, both Azadi and Al Rassoul have adopted a hybrid model to accommodate both grocery shopping and a space for fresh food and a small seating area. Through this model, the grocery stores also act as a space for community gatherings, as I observed several families and groups of friends eating at these tables speaking in their native languages and wearing traditional Kurdish clothing. As expected, these stores all emphasized

their spice sections, as these ingredients are often essential to the construction of ethnic dishes. I also detected several options that were not available at other local grocery stores, such as a much more robust section of meats including rabbit, many seafood options, and full animals for purchase. For example, the stores had labels that read “full rabbit without head” and “USDA Approved Whole Duck Free Range.” Multiple of the stores sold large knives and saws, and Al Rassoul even had a garden outside their store, perhaps assuming a model of home and from-scratch cooking. Such a community-oriented ambiance at these food markets can endorse and encourage community-oriented meals at home, as well as a passion for cultural cuisine.

Next to the meats section, multiple Kurdish markets sold large knives

Ethnographies: Large Grocery Stores in Nashville, TN

In addition to conducting ethnographies at Kurdish and Latinx food enterprises, I carried out similar routines in local umbrella international grocery stores, as well as the ALDI and Walmart Supercenter in the same neighborhood. At the local international grocery store that blended many foreign cultures, Fresh & Fresh, I found similarities to the Kurdish and Latinx markets and restaurants I had seen earlier. Again, I found copious meat options compared to other larger grocery chains, including options often not offered such as chicken feet, pork tongue, as well as the liver and tail of several animals. In this sense, the grocery store retains the tradition of some international cultures wherein much less of the animal is wasted after being killed. Moreover, I observed various religious items of different religions, such as Catholicism-inspired candles to cater to the local Latin American community.

At Fresh & Fresh, I not only observed workers at the deli counter speaking Spanish, but the signs at the deli counter assumed a non-English speaking customer, as they were translated into multiple languages excluding English. In addition to the linguistic aspect, my experience continued to embody a blend of cultures through the music I heard on the overhead radio. For example, I heard the Spanish/English hybrid song “Havana” by Camila Cabello, a Cuban American singer, along with other multilingual songs. Again, this appears to illuminate the hybrid lives and lived experiences of immigrants in Nashville, who often keep in constant communication with people in their native country.

At Fresh & Fresh International Grocery Store, the deli counter displays its options in multiple languages excluding English

After this visit, I visited both the ALDI and Walmart grocery stores on the same street and came across very different options. Notably, both large corporate stores have garnered reputations for affordable diets, forcing them further into competition with the local ethnic stores described above. For example, ALDI employs cost-cutting strategies such as shopping cart renting and omitting grocery bags to keep prices low (Noviello, 2023). Despite the reputations of these two budget-friendly stores, I still observed vast differences between them and the immigrant-owned outlets. Immediately, I perceived a vastly different and less efficient use of space at ALDI, with wide rows and large shopping carts compared to the community-oriented Kurdish markets. There were also markedly fewer families and less social interaction; it seemed more of a chore to grocery shop than a community-building activity. In the Walmart Supercenter on the same block, there seemed to be a distinct influence from the local international

community as displayed by the bilingual employees and labels, yet the aisle with international foods remained quite limited. Inverse to the Kurdish grocery stores, both large chains contained a sizable alcohol section, and minimal options in the spice sections. Also contrary to the international stores, most of the spices' labels in ALDI read "made in Illinois," as opposed to the international manufacturing of many of the spices sold in the Kurdish grocery outlets. Thus, it is possible that immigrants can acquire a taste of home at their local immigrant-owned grocery stores but not at their corporate competitors, which can compensate for the inequitable positioning of the corporate grocery stores themselves that disadvantage immigrant communities.

Ethnographies in Tampa, FL

I sat in my car outside of Mi Pueblito Bakery on North Armenia Avenue in Tampa, FL reading internet reviews about the establishment's "go-to" items. As I glanced upward across the street, I noticed a line of flags sticking up out of fenceposts to represent and support the native countries of the community's inhabitants. The inclusion of the flags of Mexico, the United States, and other Central and South American countries did not surprise me, as these places of origin had been the focus of much literature on the Nuevo South. However, the Cuban flag stood out as central to the community. Upon entering both establishments that I visited, the Cuban flag seemed to be a décor staple. The geographic origin of Florida's immigrants makes it unique among states in the US South as it receives immigrants from nearby Caribbean countries at higher rates. Especially when the country of origin for immigrants is an island, it seems that a cultural passion for this country is retained upon immigrating to the US, particularly in food businesses.

Along North Armenia Avenue in Tampa, FL, flags of different Latin American countries line the street

My site visits in Tampa, FL mirrored my experiences in South Nashville, enhancing the validity of my results. The purpose of these visits was to attain more geographic diversity so I could discuss the region through a more holistic lens and to ensure that my observations in Nashville did not constitute anomalies. Through my visit to Papi's Food Market and Mi Pueblito Bakery and Restaurant on North Armenia Avenue, I achieved both objectives by making parallel observations to my site visits in Nashville. For example, I noticed the same religious candles available for sale and the same linguistic preference for Spanish. Unlike Nashville however, these stores made many Cuban food options available, in alignment with the larger Cuban population and more diverse Latinx population in Florida overall. In a similar fashion to the Kurdish restaurants in Nashville, Papi's Food Market offered "Pizza Cubana," an Americanized food that caters to a larger audience. Overall, my observations in Tampa confirm the validity of

my field notes in Nashville, as both cities paint a picture of immigrant food businesses that are central to their respective communities.

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. The volume of Latinx immigration to this area has enabled scholars to refer to the area as the "Nuevo South," a modern-day iteration of the New South of the reconstruction area that saw dramatic demographic change and continued oppression as well. 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, TN, immigrant communities utilize 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, the Kurdish and Latin American communities have built an especially high number of these institutions on Nolensville Pike where I conducted ethnographies 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 definition (Wyckoff, 2014).

Scholars published a surplus of expository literature on the Nuevo South during the 2000s and 2010s while the immigrant population continued to skyrocket. Since these publications, many studies have been conducted with further depth into specific areas on this topic to supplement the prior publications that had prioritized breadth. In addition to investigating the concept of placemaking, this research has helped to identify three areas where further study can be conducted in alignment with this trend in literature. Firstly, I believe the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these businesses can prove to be an essential area of study, as these spaces have an increased potential to bring communities together after a period of isolation. Secondly, 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. Thirdly, 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 appear more people-based and steeped in anthropology. However, I believe that scholars in

geography, anthropology, and sociology can conduct the above next steps to complement this research.

All three areas suggested for further study will help give a voice to communities currently threatened by the growing mainstream white tourist culture in Nashville and throughout the US South. Whether these communities are spending more time together due to the pandemic, interacting with other immigrant groups at higher rates, or parking taco trucks in more public and semipublic spaces, all these factors embody a ubiquitous desire for the creation of quality places. As scholarship trends toward understanding these groups on a deeper level, they can understand their important role in the making of a diverse and thriving contemporary city in the US South. In cities like Nashville, this understanding can engender empathy from politicians and 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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