

**Appraising tacos:**  
Unraveling value-imbuing processes and narratives of authenticity

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, simultaneous to a continued American debate regarding illegal Latino immigrants, taco stands and Mexican restaurants have gained popularity in urban areas including Chicago. In this project I take a directed look at the discourses that underlie Mexican-American street food in order to better understand processes of authenticity and meaning. The theoretical aim of this project is to understand how food is commodified and given value through performances of authenticity. I examine literature on this topic including work on the social value of commodities, semiotic analysis of commodities, linguistic materiality, and placemaking and consumption. The paper then briefly examines the implications of the process of commodifying food and authenticity, considering literature that discusses the capacity for food as a medium for agency and resistance as well as literature that confronts the appropriation of foodways and traditions as a form of domination. This analysis is then applied to my own independent fieldwork at a Cal-Mex and Oaxacan inspired taco restaurant (called Supernova in this paper) located in a hip, gentrified neighborhood in Chicago. In doing so I employ frameworks and notions analyzed above. I then turn to an exploration of the narrative of authenticity employed by producers at Supernova. Moreover, I seek to understand the repercussions of these processes of commodification and appropriation for those whose authenticity and food traditions are being performed and commodified (namely, Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants). The paper concludes that the narrative of authenticity employed by producers at Supernova works to index both a timeless rural Oaxaca and a sanitized southern America that includes the most accessible and commodifiable aspects of this regional experience (tacos, music, drink) while erasing the history and complexities of each of these aspects. Ultimately, in erasing these histories, producers at Supernova act to essentially re-silence Mexicans in Chicago.

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## Introduction

In recent years, Mexican restaurants and taco joints have gained popularity in urban areas, including Chicago. Paradoxically, the acceptance of Mexican fare has occurred in the context of a vigorous debate over American immigration policy, a policy that often considers deportation of Mexican immigrants who reside in the country without legal status. Alongside the Mexican owned, “authentic” restaurants found in areas like Pilsen or Clark Street, Chicago hosts a different kind of Mexican (or Mexican-inspired) cuisine. Found in hip, gentrified neighborhoods including Wicker Park and Lincoln Park, this class of Mexican-inspired cuisine is often a trendy, foodie-centric interpretation of Mexican street food (tacos). This paper aims to better illuminate this phenomenon. Rather than taking a strictly political economic standpoint in this investigation, I instead adopt a directed look at the semiotic and political economic discourses that underlie this sort of Mexican-American street food.

This project aims to reveal how food is commodified and given value through performances of authenticity. This paper applies an analysis of prevailing theories to a specific site: a Cal-Tex (California-Texas) and Oaxacan inspired street food restaurant in a hip, gentrified neighborhood in Chicago. The examined literature considers food as imbued with meaning and value that is created through various processes that are simultaneously linguistic, material, and social. Authenticity is discussed as a construction that is commodified in the creation of the value of food. My analysis of the field site focuses on understanding how producers at Supernova (my fieldsite)<sup>i</sup> give value to their cuisine (tacos) and create a narrative of authenticity. Finally, this project seeks to understand the social implications of these processes on Mexican and Mexican-American populations.

My inquiry arises in the context of both anthropological work and real world events that have justified my intervention in the subject. My research fits into the inquiry of food studies, a new and growing area of anthropology and other social disciplines; adding to this body of work is an exciting and important endeavor. Moreover, beyond the purely academic goals of understanding and augmenting a body of knowledge, I hope to better understand the social implications of this work on food and value; food is an important arena for understanding processes of cultural representation and, therefore, inclusion and identity. The focus for my independent fieldwork was elite reproduction and commodification of Mexican-American food and identity, which is especially pertinent to the current social context of Chicago and the United States. Representations of Mexican and Mexican-American culture are especially relevant today due to both gentrification and ongoing conversations about mediating and limiting immigrant access to America. The implications of my research connect to understanding new ways in which “Mexicanness” is created and represented; these representations have implications on belonging and self-identity for Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants. Will commodification of Mexican authenticity pave the way for acceptance and agency for Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, or is this commodification fundamentally a form of appropriation (or “cultural colonialism”) in nature?

This subject could be discussed in a multitude of arenas, but I have chosen to use food as a medium for analysis because of its dynamic nature: food is a universal necessity that often at first seems benign and insignificant, but instead is an important medium for rigorous analysis and study. Work on food in this discipline and others is ever growing and provides important theoretical frameworks for future analysis. The relationship between humans and food is

fascinating and important in understanding interactions between individuals, populations, and the material world.

### **Making food meaningful**

I delve into different anthropological theories and approaches towards the study of food, especially in regards to how food conveys and creates meanings that draw upon notions of authenticity. The review examines at how literature discusses food (especially in relation to authenticity), focusing on academic work on food in terms of commodification and the social implications of such actions. The body of literature that includes analysis on these subjects is cross-disciplinary and extensive. I attempt to touch upon several theories or ethnographies in order to allow for a more comprehensive analysis.

The works I examine in this paper begin to explain several overlapping methodologies for analyzing the meaning and value of food. First I survey literature that considers commodification and food. I am interested in the following questions: while food itself is a commodity, what is commodified in the making of its value? What language, materials, traditions, heritages, etcetera are commodified? What are the processes for doing so? What are the social implications? The approaches analyzed include the social value of commodities, semiotic analysis of commodities, linguistic materiality, and placemaking and consumption. I then briefly examine the implications of this process of commodifying food and authenticity. Here I discuss literature that discusses the capacity for food as a medium for agency and resistance as well as literature that discusses the appropriation of foodways and traditions as a form of domination.

*Commodifying chow: Theories of object worth*

My primary goal in this literature review is to cultivate an understanding of commodification and creation of authenticity, and how these processes give value to food. My aim in developing this review of sources that approach this topic is to develop a framework for examining Supernova, a Mexican-American street food restaurant in urban gentrified Chicago; I hope to understand how authenticity is performed and created at Supernova and will draw upon the theoretical frameworks examined below in order to do so.

A first component in the literature on commodification, authenticity, and food is the influential theory of the social life of objects (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1998). While not directly addressing food, this seminal theoretical approach discusses value in relation to objects or commodities. This is a discussion of the various ways objects and commodities hold value for individuals and groups, as well as how this value is created; value is never an inherent quality of an object but is instead a judgment attached to an object by its subjects (Appadurai 1986). Commodities gain value through exchange, and the creation of value through exchange is a politically mediated process. Different types of values exist (including technical, social, economic, aesthetic, memory, spiritual, knowledge) and these values are always in flux for a particular object. Objects have a “cultural biography”; an object’s cultural biography focuses on the events through which an object becomes culturally indicated as possessing a certain type of value (Geary 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Finally, this theory shows the reflexivity of creation that means that while humans create objects, objects also have the capacity to shape particularities of human existence (Appadurai 1987). This method for understanding the creation and transformation of an object’s value can be useful in understanding the meanings attached to foods.

Another related theoretical approach to analyzing the production of the value of food is



one that draws on Peircean semiotics to take stock of the specific materialities of an object or entity that is given value within a larger sociocultural context (Fehérváry 2009; Keane 2003; Meneley 2008; Munn 1986; Weiss 1996; Weiss 2012). This framework investigates production of value as a process through which individuals are able to engage with objects and commodities in the world in order to define themselves (Weiss 2012). Weiss (2012) uses a semiotic and political-economic approach to examine totalities as defined by the relationship between their parts; he looks at how relationships formed through the production and consumption of a pig come to be embodied in the totality of the pig. In other words, he looks at how fetishized producer-consumer relationships become embodied in the totality of the pig (which is consumed in parts), and it is in this way that the whole pig and certain parts of the pig receive value as a commodity. Ultimately, this approach locates value in food as a result of concrete qualities of the food as well as of the relationships between individuals, objects, animals and other entities in the food production system.

A third framework for analyzing the production of value focuses on the use of language and materiality by producers (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2012; Cavanaugh & Shankar 2014). The theoretical work introduces the notion of linguistic materiality, in which linguistic activities shape the material qualities of an object; in other words, linguistic materiality describes the outcome of processes by which linguistic activity is bound to material qualities. Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014) use two case studies, artisanal sausage production in Italy and car commercials tailored to an Asian American audience, to show how producers create value by constructing authenticity through linguistic and material actions. They examine the linguistic and material work that is done by producers in order to index authenticity and produce value, noting the creation of an ethnolinguistic heritage that indicates authenticity and can be indexed by the use

of certain linguistic materialities. This theory draws upon Bakhtin's (1981) concept of "chronotopes," which link events that occur at different places and different times; producers create intertextual and linguistic links that connect disparate times and places resulting in the construction of a regional heritage. This heritage can in turn be indexed through the linguistic materiality of signs, including food, that point back to the chronotopical regional heritage. Ultimately, this results in construction of authenticity for commodification.

Another body of literature that focuses on consumption and commodification discusses the spaces in which commodities are sold and bought (Coles & Crang 2011; Goss 1993; Falk and Campbell 1997; Miller 1998). This literature also discusses the variety of relationships with commodities and individuals in a retail spaces that contribute to the indexicality of commodities (Coles & Crang 2011; Shields 1992). Coles and Crang (2011) investigate the role of place and placemaking in consumption (in this case, in ethical and alternative consumption). They examine the necessity of place to the aesthetic of alternative consumption in terms of differentiation from mainstream consumption. Using Borough Market in London as a case study, the authors look at how authenticity, naturalness, and simplicity are performed to create and stage a place that is associated with alternative consumption. They also show how aesthetics of "displacement" are used to connect a place of consumption with other places, especially places of production; this is used to distinguish the place as a singular place of consumption. This ideology shows how a place can work to index and create authenticity of a commodity, including food.

### *Social implications of making meaning*

After developing an understanding of how value is imbued in food and the role of authenticity in this process, the next step is to begin to see how these processes are relevant to individuals and populations. In this section I briefly examine the implications of the

commodification of authenticity via food. Here I delve into literature that discusses the capacity for food as a medium for agency, resistance, and cultural change, as well as literature that discusses the appropriation of foodways and traditions as a form of domination.

One body of literature that addresses the implications of the processes that imbue objects with social meaning address how food consumption and commodification practices can be a source of positive social action. An example of this is the agency food, commodity use, and consumption practices can give to individuals and populations, as discussed by Croegaert (2011). Like Weiss (2012), Croegaert (2011) examines the social relationships that are embedded in an item of food and consumption practices; contributing to the work of other scholars (Caldwell 2009; Patico 2009; Shankar 2006; Weiner 1992) she looks at the social life of one food commodity with the understanding that the social life of objects is connected to forms of sociality and social relationships. Croegaert studies Bosnian refugee-immigrants in Chicago who engage in the preparation, consumption, and commodification of slow-coffee. She demonstrates how these Bosnian immigrants use slow-coffee to mitigate their circumstances and evaluate their displacement in a postcolonial space. Through this practice they are able to reclaim dignity as those who have suffered terrible violence by emphasizing the domestic sphere; by recuperating slow-coffee they are also able to critique the excessive demands placed on them by neoliberal capitalism by calling attention to their own labor in the slow-coffee making process. Here, the social value of food allows an immigrant population to reclaim and navigate circumstances largely out of their control.

Barbas (2003) looks at the capacity of food and restaurants to promote cultural exchange and understanding between diverse cultural groups where other institutions could not. As a case study, she takes a political economic framework to look at the adoption of Chinese and Chinese-

American cuisine into the American diet despite anti-immigrant ethos. Barbas charts the popularization of “chop suey” and other Chinese and Chinese-American foods in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, showing that food allowed Americans to transgress certain social, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. She nuances this exchange, however, by calling upon Lisa Heldke’s (2001) suggestion that the consumption of foreign food acts as a form of culinary imperialism in which dominance is asserted over a culture by the appropriation and subversion of its cuisine. She notes, for example, that the dish that helped propagate American consumption was chop suey, a dish fabricated by Chinese Americans for the American consumer that was never eaten in China. Moreover, Barbas suggests that food and restaurants allowed for cultural exchange where other institutions could not because of the social dynamics of the situation: the exotic Other as the subservient server and cook was not threatening to the middle-class white American. My field research at Supernova confirms a similar situation in which Mexican and Latino cooks are involved in the production of the cuisine, but do not directly profit from the restaurant’s success, thereby rendering their involvement less threatening to the restaurant’s typical patronage.

Building on this notion that commodification of authenticity and consumption of food may be a form of cultural domination, it is important to look at literature confronting food appropriation. Heldke introduces the notion of “culinary colonialism” in her analysis of ethnic cookbooks. When culinary colonialism occurs, an Other’s cuisine is viewed as a resource for one’s own use; it is the assertion of dominance over a culture by the appropriation and subversion of its cuisine. Heldke shows how this mining of “exotic” food as a resource can manifest in many ways, including the acquisition of cultural capital (as explained by Bourdieu (1984)) through familiarity with the exotic. Heldke notes that in these circumstances, exoticism

is seen to index authenticity. She also raises questions over ownership of a given cuisine or recipe, wondering when the use of a recipe or cuisine is considered theft. She discusses the transformation of “traditional” recipes into commodities. Finally, Heldke explores food as an anticolonialist medium, proposing the inclusion of the Other into the creation of culinary resources, including cookbooks, as well as an acknowledgement of the continued colonialist domination that comes with eating.

*Wrapping it up: Understanding the value of food*

The literature analyzed in this section proposes methods for understanding the processes involved in imbuing objects with value and for understanding the value of food. This body of work highlights the linguistic, social, and material activity involved in infusing an object, namely food, with value. The notion of a social life of objects is introduced, showing that an object’s subjects determine the value of objects, and that the exchange of objects is a politically mediated process that creates value. Next, a semiotic approach shows how value is determined by the material properties of an object as well as social relationships that become embodied in an object. A linguistic materiality based approach demonstrates how linguistic functions that index a chronotopic authenticity are attached to material objects in order to create value. Finally, an approach focusing on placemaking illustrates the role of developing a context for an object’s consumption, in order to index authenticity and imbue the object with value. A related body of literature examines the implications of consuming food and of the processes that attach value to food. A first group develops an understanding of food that allows for human agency in the consumption and creation of food. The capacity for food to allow for cultural exchange and understanding is expounded, with the caveat that the processes that allow this exchange also work to relegate the cultural Other to an unthreatening role. Similarly, an analysis of culinary

imperialism shows how the consumption of food can work to dominate other cultural groups. Ultimately, this body of literature works to facilitate a theoretical understanding of the processes by which food is imbued with value, and to illuminate the social consequences of culinary consumption.

### **Turning to tacos**

The literature review above highlighted and explained frameworks for analyzing food in order to understand how people imbue food with different forms of social value; I also attempted to develop an understanding of how authenticity is commodified in the process of valorizing food. Ideological frameworks for understanding how these processes for creating value of objects and food include the social life of objects, semiotics, linguistic materiality, and placemaking. Research has also been performed to address the implications of food consumption that focus on food as agentic, fostering cultural exchange, and as a form of cultural appropriation and imperialism. In the following section I apply this body of work to my own independent research as I examine how the value of tacos is created in a Mexican-American street food restaurant located in a hip, gentrified neighborhood in Chicago. In doing so I employ frameworks and notions discussed above including the social life of objects, semiotic analysis, linguistic materiality, and placemaking. I then turn to an exploration of how the notion of authenticity is employed by producers at Supernova. Moreover, I also seek to understand the repercussions of these processes of commodification and appropriation for those whose authenticity and food traditions are being performed and commodified (namely, Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants).

*Who's cooking dinner? Demographics of Mexican cuisine in Chicago*

The need to better understand representations of Mexican and Mexican-American identity is mandated by the overwhelming presence of Mexican and Mexican-American people both locally in Chicago and nationally. A brief overview of the statistical presence of Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants in Chicago helps to illustrate this demand for comprehension. The 2010 US Census Bureau report (US Census Bureau 2009-2013) on Chicago shows that 28.7% (775, 748 people) of Chicago's population self-identifies as Hispanic or Latino, and 21.3% are of specifically Mexican heritage. This statistic indicates the presence of a substantial Mexican population in Chicago. Many of these individuals are Americans of Mexican descent, while others are first-generation Mexican immigrants. According to a report written by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR US and Illinois Immigrants by the Numbers), 45.0% of immigrants in Chicago have come from Mexico. Mexico is the most predominant country of origin for immigrants in Chicago and the U.S. Moreover, the ICIRR report notes that Illinois generally ranks among the top six receiving states for new immigrants, following California, New York, Florida, Texas, and New Jersey. Using data from the US Census Bureau and the Pew Hispanic Center, the report synthesizes the citizen status of immigrants in the United States and Illinois, characterizing the population as breaking into thirds: "More than 1/3 naturalized citizens, less than 1/3 undocumented, the remaining 1/3 lawful permanent resident or some other lawful status (such as refugee or asylee)" (ICIRR US and Illinois Immigrants by the Numbers: 4). The identity of these immigrants also varies based on their Mexican state of origin. According to a report done by the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame du Lac, nine states in Mexico account for the place of birth for 80% of the Mexican-born population that responded to the Chicago Area Survey. These states are: Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Morelos, Durango, Guerrero, Mexico, Chihuahua, and Distrito

Federal (D.F.) (2005:6). These statistics emphasize the important presence of a diverse Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant population in Chicago and therefore the importance of working to understand representations of “Mexicanness” in Chicago.

While my fieldwork focused on a restaurant owned and operated by non-Mexican proprietors, the contribution of Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants in the food service industry is substantial. In a report prepared by the Migration Policy Institute drawing from US Census Bureau data, 24.0% of all foreign-born immigrant workers in Illinois in 2012 were employed in the service industries (MPI 2012). Other data focusing specifically on the food service and restaurant industry corroborate this general conclusion. Another report issued by ICIRR on immigrants in the Illinois economy reveals that 26.6% of workers in food preparation were immigrant workers (ICIRR Immigrants in Illinois Economy:1). Other data that focuses solely on Mexican immigrants also highlights the extensive involvement of Mexican immigrants in the food service industry. According to a report generated by the Institute for Latino Studies, 11% of Mexican immigrant women in 2005 worked in the food service industry, a number that is superseded only by the number of immigrant women employed in manufacturing (2005:28).

The categories of specific jobs performed by Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans employed in the food industry is also of interest. Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American involvement in the food service industry is often distinct from Caucasian or other workers. A 2010 report organized by a Chicago labor advocacy group presented a comparison of the demographics of front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house staff; this study revealed that white workers constituted 80% of front-of-the-house staff while nearly two-thirds of back-of-the-house staff was Hispanic (Avila 2010). This phenomenon has implications on the representations of “Mexicanness” that are created by restaurants. While Mexican immigrants and Mexican-



Americans are involved in the business that creates and commodifies authenticity and in turn produce representations of Mexican-American identity, these back-of-the-house workers are not commonly involved in the creation of such representations. This lack of involvement reflects the fact that the class of Mexican-American street food restaurants highlighted by this paper are often owned or managed by non-Hispanics; these groups do not create representations that are produced by these restaurants, even if they are involved in the physical fabrication of the food. With this dichotomy in mind, it is especially important to understand the implications of the value imbuing processes employed by these restaurants.

Ultimately, the large Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant populations in Chicago, as well as their involvement in the food service industry, justifies an understanding of the representations of “Mexicanness” produced by restaurants in Chicago. The value imbuing processes used by the Mexican-American street food restaurants in gentrified neighborhoods work to produce and evoke palatable examples of authenticity. These forms of authenticity produce representations of the Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants that are ever present in the kitchens and homes of Chicagoans when Mexican cuisine is consumed and produced. Understanding these processes facilitates an understanding of the moral activity of non-Hispanic restaurant owners that work to produce cultural representations. In this regard, the types authenticity that are selected, the specifics of cultural histories that are erased, and the traditions that are appropriated all contribute to defining the phenomenon.

### *Fieldwork Methodology*

My fieldwork included both participant observation and interviews at Supernova in Chicago. I targeted my research towards the contents of the menu and the linguistic materiality and semiotics of these items. In my analysis I also attempt to position the choices made by

producers at Supernova in the context of the history, relationships, and geography that has influenced choices. Moreover, I begin to analyze the ways in which Supernova cultivates and markets a particular dining experience, including placemaking through aesthetic choices, music, and atmosphere that performs authenticity and references a chronotopic heritage. From interviews with owners and managers I aimed to gain an understanding of whether and how these decisions (menu and aesthetic) were consciously created, and to what extent authenticity is deliberately employed. I asked whether perceived authenticity is employed to order to attract and satisfy customers, and whether producers believe that their product is genuinely authentic, or is their purpose something else entirely? I aimed to nuance my understanding of the work involved by seeking to identify how the performance of a heritage-based authenticity fits in with other aspects including those specific to Supernova. For example, the restaurant pairs Mexican-American street food with a honkytonk bourbon bar. In a northern U.S. city, this is an interesting blending of two southern identities: Mexican and Southern U.S. I hypothesized that the restaurant attempts to index a sanitized southern America that includes the most accessible and commodifiable aspects of this regional experience (tacos, music, drink) while erasing the history and complexities of each of these aspects. Moreover, producers at Supernova are able to erase these histories and complexities by appropriating the “Other” and shutting them out of the decision-making process. Ultimately, I concluded that to erase this history, producers at Supernova act to essentially re-silence Mexicans in Chicago.

I spent three months communicating with Supernova staff and observing the fieldsite. My fieldwork took place over the winter months of January, February, and March. I was confronted with both the frigid Chicago weather and the restaurant off-season in undertaking my fieldwork; nonetheless, my fieldwork was pointed and productive. I obtained consent from the head of

marketing and public relations at the restaurant group associated with Supernova who introduced me to the shift manager Nelly Mistry,<sup>ii</sup> Nelly became my key liaison with the restaurant and was helped me to organize fieldtrips and interviews with several key interlocutors. I held multiple interviews with Nelly as well as the chef de cuisine, James Horne<sup>iii</sup>, and the bar manager and buyer, Andre Bouchard<sup>iv</sup>. I also engaged in participant observation at the location several times, spending time in the restaurant in both the afternoon and evening, on weekdays and weekends, and at a table (general seating and the patio) and the bar.

### *Stepping into Supernova*

Supernova is a hip Mexican-American street food restaurant and bourbon bar located in a trendy, gentrified neighborhood in Chicago. The restaurant website describes the space as follows:

Supernova is a bourbon and beer-focused, taco-slinging, late-night honky-tonk in the heart of Chicago's [trendy] neighborhood. Executive Chef [who is the head of a prestigious Chicago based restaurant group] ... and Chef de Cuisine James Horne's menu, inspired by authentic Mexican street food, is complemented by an extensive house-selected single barrel bourbon program. Housed in a defunct 1940's gas station, the taqueria's soundtrack of classic country and rock & roll is selected and spun by our bar staff.

The restaurant is located on one of the two main thoroughfares of the neighborhood and is surrounded by chic restaurants, bars, specialty doughnut and coffee shops, and plenty of both sophisticated stores and quirky shops. Outside the restaurant sits a taco truck, painted bright yellow and emblazoned with the restaurant's logo (a large five-pointed star) and stylized images of a rooster, a shrimp, a lime, a Mexican soda, and a large truck-long corn stalk. The truck is situated to the right of the restaurant, which consists of a large outdoor patio with tables and structural wooden booths, a glass front section of the indoor space filled with metallic silver tables and sunny yellow chairs, a back section with a large circular bar and surrounding booths. The interior has an industrial feel, with exposed piping and hanging light fixtures. The restaurant

and bar are also lit by colored fairy lights, draped along the walls. The back wall features a large metallic fixture lit by many yellow light bulbs that reads “TACOS” in a syncopated typeface.

During my trips to the fieldsite, Honkytonk music emanated from vinyl records on a turntable and joins the babble of conversation; the restaurant was not quiet, but instead was characterized by sounds of eating and leisure. The staff wore street clothes and convened around the bar or the expediting window and conversed amongst themselves when not serving or bussing tables; all of the serves were young (twenties to thirties), hip, and exuberant. The restaurant and bar were often full or near full, even during the off-hours in between lunch and dinner. Patrons of the restaurant during the lunch period often visited either alone (at the bar), in pairs, or in groups of three; larger groups were often present in the evening, though pairs and small groups were still common. The patrons were eclectic, ranging in age from their early twenties to those who appeared to be in their seventies; the ages of the majority of customers were between twenty to forties. Many patrons were Caucasian, although a range of racial diversity was not uncommon. Several groups of Latino males clad in work clothes and boots, possibly on lunch breaks, dined at the restaurant. Many other patrons were either dressed in suits (businessmen), or fashionable modern styles that included hats (e.g. beanies, caps). The trendy crowd was reflective of the “hipster” population iconic of this neighborhood. Patrons seemed to order a variety of items, some (especially at the bar) only drinking margaritas or *micheladas* (Mexican tequila cocktails), or mixed bourbon drinks, while others shared chips and guacamole, or plates of tacos.

### **Evaluating the taco joint**

This fieldsite was the grounds for the independent research that informs the bulk of this thesis. In the first section of this paper, I assembled a literature review that investigated several different theoretical approaches towards understanding how objects (and especially food) are

imbued with meaning and value. In this section I examine the case study of Supernova, a trendy Cal-Mex street food restaurant in urban Chicago. The restaurant is examined using the lens of the various theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, and is considered in the context of the social life of objects, semiotics, linguistic materiality, and placemaking.

### *A tale about tacos*

The first framework outlined above focuses on the social life of objects as illustrated by thinkers such as Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986). Understanding the social life of objects helps to inform an understanding of their value as attached by consumers of these objects; humans give objects values through politically mediated processes that change and evolve. Objects can be imbued with different kinds of value (e.g. social, emotional, economic) at different points in time; each object has a “cultural biography” in which a series of events come to determine the type of value with which it is associated. In the case of Supernova, many objects could be analyzed in terms of their social life including bourbon and vinyl renditions of honkytonk music, but here I will focus on the social life of the food served at Supernova – the taco. My focus on tacos rather than on other aspects of the material culture present at Supernova relates to a quest to better understand the real-life social implications of the representations created by restaurants like Supernova on understandings of “Mexicanness” and Mexican-American identity.

The history and social life of tacos is complex; food historian Jeffery Pilcher (2012) writes, “The history of tacos, like eating tacos, is a messy business” (17). In his book “Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food” (2012), Pilcher attempts to nuance the understanding of the “authentic” taco and, more broadly, Mexican cuisine. In so doing, he charts both the evolution of the taco as a food item, as well as the meaning of the taco to various groups of

people in points of time around the world. Importantly, Pilcher shows that the “authentic” static Mexican taco does not exist, but that the taco is indeed a product with historical periods of determination and definition. Using Pilcher’s work (2012), which joins a larger body of literature on the topic of tacos and Mexican cuisine (Arellano 2013; Tausend 2012), it is possible to understand the social life of the taco and therefore understand how the taco has come to exist in its current context at Supernova.

Pilcher shows how tacos, which are often considered part of a Mexican national cuisine, are the product of a series of food traditions hailing from different times and places. He critiques the notion of a single authentic Mexican cuisine, noting, “Mexican food has been globalized from the very beginning” (5). Pilcher describes how Mexican food originated in the blending of Native American and Spanish foods after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire. During this period, Mediterranean crops and livestock were introduced to the Americas, as were food traditions hailing from Spanish colonizers, African slaves, and Asian immigrants. This mestizo culture produced a varied national culinary tradition; transitory social and political boundaries were reflected in varied food traditions including status-based grain consumption in which urban Spaniards consumed wheat bread and rural Indians ate corn tortillas. Regional variations in cuisine are reflective of the multiple pre-Mexico linguistic groups including the Nahuas, Zapotecs, and Maya, identities that were often elided by rule of New Spain as they were given the common label of “Indians” (22). These aspects briefly introduce the globalized nature of Mexican cuisine, and suggest the inefficacy of the search for authentic Mexican cuisine. In the search for an understanding of the cultural biography of Mexican cuisine, it is easy to see how it has meant different things at different times and places for different people.

The history of tacos follows a similarly complex path. According to Pilcher, peoples in the region in which Mexico is located have been eating something like tacos, corn tortillas rolled with meat and beans in the center, for more than a millennium; however, the taco itself only became ubiquitous during the twentieth century. He shows how this form, which was one of many regional *antojitos* (“little whimsies”, or snack foods) came to be entitled taco and associated globally with Mexican cuisine. Originally served to miners near Mexico City who called their dynamite sticks “tacos”, these edible tacos were established as working class fare and eventually “spread across the country and up the social ladder” (8). In the twentieth century tacos became a symbol of the dominance of the capital as they sometimes superseded regional *antojitos*. The taco was introduced in the United States in the 1920s after a history of Mexican street food during the end of the nineteenth century including chili “queens” in San Antonio and “hot tamale” men in Los Angeles; these forms of street food were viewed as both desirable and dangerous and helped to cement conceptions of Mexican cuisine as street fare rather than haute cuisine (105-129).

In the post-war era, the Mexican-American taco was created within the space that arose between the competition of Mexicans who owned taco trucks and restaurants and corporate Americans such as Taco Bell’s Glen Bell (Pilcher 2012:131). The Mexican-American tacos created during this time in the Southwest frequently adapted Mexican culinary forms to use American ingredients, and were often dismissed as inauthentic by Mexicans. During this period in Mexico, people began to reclaim indigenous cuisines that had previously been shunned in the attempt to reconcile a national identity and cuisine from among several cuisines, including French, creole, and indigenous. However, as these indigenous cuisines consolidated and domestic culinary tourism increased, many local traditions were lost. Moreover, at this time these

rediscovered regional native cuisines associated with regions such as Oaxaca (*moles*) and Sonora (*carne asada*) came to index authentic “Mexicanness”, while foods created in California and Texas were written off as inauthentic by Mexican Nationalists, even as they were created by Mexican immigrants. These Mexican-American cuisines associated with regional Mexican cultural pockets evolved into the “Mexes”: Cal-Mex (Californian-Mexican); Tex-Mex (Texas-Mexican); New Mex (New Mexican) (146). Americans familiar with the cuisine introduced these versions of Mexican-American cuisine, and especially tacos, to a global audience during the Cold War; the two groups primarily responsible for this global proliferation were American military personnel stationed in the southwest and Californian surfers (11). This means of introducing Mexican and Mexican-American cuisine to a global audience has tied this cuisine to the United States in the eyes of the world. Moreover, this newer introduction to a Mexican cuisine joined global conceptions of the cuisine established in colonial times with the export of maize, chiles, and chocolate, each of which influenced impressions of a Mesoamerican cuisine in specific ways; corn was viewed with scorn as it was associated with lower class populations and resulted in pellagra in populations who failed to nixtamalize the maize, but chocolate was coveted by the elite.

This history, provided by Pilcher (2012), recounts the social life of the taco. He develops an understanding that reflects the various stages of differentiation and definition that have led to a modern understanding of the meaning of the taco; in other words, he sketches out a modern understanding of what makes a taco authentic.

### *Breaking down the tortilla*

Following an understanding of the social life of the taco, it is possible to probe further into the meaning of the taco. Another theoretical framework explored above is the application of



semiotics to food or other objects. As demonstrated by Weiss (2012), both the specific material qualities of an object as well as the relationships and actions involved in the production and consumption of the object work to define the value of the object. As in the attempt to understand the social life of objects as investigated above, the history and politics surrounding food are integral to understanding the meaning of the food. Here, the history of the social relations involved in the production of tacos as translated into the physical and material qualities of the tacos can help to explain the meaning of the tacos. While tacos have many components that vary both regionally and temporally, as shown above, one element that remains ever present is the tortilla. Pilcher's work (2012) can help to inform an understanding of how social relations are embodied within the tortilla. This in turn can help to explain the meaning of the taco in the setting of Supernova.

Pilcher (2012) explains the consequence of maize (corn) in the development of Mexican and Mexican-American cuisine. According to Pilcher, the significance of maize stems back even to the cultivation and domestication of the plant in 7000 B.C.E (24). At this time, a "midwife" or "botanist" in what is now southwestern Mexico cultivated the first maize plant from a mutation in the tough shelled teosinte plant (24-24). This act is significant as it reflects a purposeful husbandry of maize; even to this day a human hand must cultivate maize, as it is unable to reproduce in the wild. Following patterns of gendered division of labor, this "botanist" was likely a woman. Female association with maize continued in the next several thousand years following the domestication of maize as it was integrated into the Mesoamerican diet. Maize requires multiple forms of food processing in order to provide maximum nutritional efficacy. In order to achieve nutritional worth, maize was ground on a metate, cooked with beans, and processed into nixtamal. The nixtamal method uses ash to free chemically bound niacin, a vitamin necessary in

the prevention of the disease pellagra. As Pilcher explains, “the recipe for tortillas required enormous physical labor from women. Arguably, they worked as hard grinding corn on the metate as did the men they fed who constructed the [pyramids]’ (27). This evidence provided by Pilcher (2012) situates tortillas as a physical manifestation of thousands of years of female effort, made concrete in the nixtamalized, flat tortilla that has continued to support Mesoamerican populations.

Pilcher (2012) illustrates the continued division of labor and efforts by women to prepare corn and tortillas through the arrival of the Spaniards, who brought many changes to what is now Mexico, including wheat. The introduction of the Spaniards and wheat heralded a new set of relationships that are now embodied in the tortilla: those of class and race. During the colonial period, breads were classed, with the Spanish eating wheat bread called *pan frances* or *pan español*, wealthy mixed race Creoles consuming *pan floreado* made of lesser quality wheat, lower class mixed-race peoples were relegated to various qualities of mixed-grain breads made from both wheat and maize called *pan común* and *pambazos*, and native peoples eating corn tortillas (32). From this evidence, one can extrapolate another set of social relations as embodied in the materiality of tortillas; corn tortillas and maize embody class and racial relations by indexing both what went into sustaining classed and racialized bodies as well as indicating the labor of specific classes and races as reflected by the costs of their bread (in terms of wealth of labor).

Pilcher gives evidence too for the engraving of regional identities and relations in tortillas. The flour tortilla—and the item most associated with it, the burrito—hails from the borderlands in what is now considered the United States (46). This area was home to a variety of Native American peoples, including cliff dwelling ancestral Pueblo farmers and semisedentary

Chichimeca people, and gave birth to regional cuisines closely associated with the American imagination of Mexican cuisine, including Tex-Mex, New Mexican, Sonorian, and Cal-Mex cuisine (48). Arising during the colonial period, the flour tortilla resulted from the planting of commercial wheat for flour by Spanish colonials and the introduction of the form of the tortilla by Mesoamerican immigrants (Pilcher 2012). Not only the material form of the tortilla changed with the use of wheat flour in these northern regions, but the labor and social relations of tortilla production also changed: “the new mechanical mill transformed the exclusively female labor of grinding grain on the metate, which was deeply symbolic of gender oppression, into a shared family task. Because flour tortillas conveyed more of the status of baking bread than of grinding corn *masa*, even men commonly prepared them when working alone on ranches and mines” (73). Here, the material qualities of flour tortillas embody regional relationships and identities as well as changing social relations.

Ultimately, Pilcher’s work on the history of the taco and Mexican cuisine evinces an interpretation of the semiotics of the tortilla that locates social relations in the material qualities of the tortilla. Understanding the tortilla as containing information about physical labor and social relations explains some of the value and meaning associated with the tortilla, and in turn, the taco. As seen above, the physical qualities of the tortilla—as either nixtamalized maize or flour—index information regarding social, relational, and labor histories. The corn tortilla indexes the importance of female labor in Mesoamerica as well as the classed and racialized division of colonial Mexico, while the flour tortilla indexes regional differences, identities, and relations.

### *Talking tacos*

A third framework explored in the first portion of this paper focuses on the linguistic materiality (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2012; Cavanaugh & Shankar 2014) of objects in order to achieve an understanding of how the objects are given value and deemed authentic. As in the study of semiotics as explored above, a focus on linguistic materiality highlights the material qualities of an object. Specifically, this method emphasizes how linguistic activities are attached to material objects in order to alter the meaning and value associated with the object. The linguistic forms stressed by this method work to index a chronotopic identity; in other words, these linguistic forms achieve associations with heritages that are imagined by connecting different times and places. In the case of Supernova, the language used to describe the tacos—son the menu and elsewhere—work to index an imagined authentic Mexican regional heritage.

Supernova's menu includes sixteen food items, of which seven are tacos. The menu also includes chips and guacamole (a dip made with avocados and often tomatoes, cilantro, and citrus), a tostada (a flat fried tortilla with toppings), and *queso fundido* (a melted cheese dip) among other options. The items on the menu (a copy of the menu is found below in endnotes)<sup>v</sup> have varied regional origins (see endnotes for a “tacografía,” a graphic map taken from the Tacopedia (2013))<sup>vi</sup>: for example, the “taco de *pollo pibil*” (“chicken thighs steamed in banana leaves, *achiote* and citrus marinade, pickled red onion, cilantro”) has origins in the southwestern Mexican region of the Yucatán and stems from Mayan cooking traditions (Holtz & Mena 2013); the “taco *al pastor*” (“marinated, spit roasted pork shoulder, grilled pineapple, grilled onion, cilantro”) hails from Puebla, a central Mexican region, and was influenced by the shawarma introduced by Lebanese immigrants in the 1960s (Holtz & Mena 2013); “taco de *pescado*” (“beer battered tilapia fillet, chipotle mayo, cabbage, red onion, lime, cilantro”) comes from the northwestern peninsula of Mexico, Baja California. All of these tacos, and others, are described

on Supernova's website as "inspired by authentic Mexican street food", while their varied regional associations are not mentioned. Here, Supernova employs a chronotopic version of authenticity by referencing a version of Mexican street food that does not differentiate between regional associations or variations despite the actual nuances in origin or influence.

The language used on the menu contributes to the value and meaning of the items on the menu described. The notion of linguistic materiality works to explain this process; the language used to describe the menu items alters or informs the meaning of the material object by indexing a regional heritage. The menu at Supernova employs the use of both Spanish and English. Most of the menu items have names that are in Spanish, but utilize English descriptions, save for certain ingredient words that are Spanish but often used in English. For example, the menu item "taco de *panza*" ("crispy, braised pork belly, tomato *guajillo* sauce, *queso fresco*, onion, cilantro") employs a Spanish name (*panza* means belly), but describes most of the ingredients in English (see "braised pork belly" instead of *panza*); the one ingredient ("guajillo sauce") that employs a Spanish word does so with a word that has entered into the English vernacular (*guajillo* is a type of chili). With the application of a Spanish name and the intermittent usage of Spanish terms, the taco is indexed as at least marginally authentic to the imagined Mexican national heritage.

Another example follows a similar format with a Spanish name ("taco de *chorizo verde*"), an English description ("pork sausage, *poblano*, *serrano*, pumpkin and sesame seeds, potato, onion, cilantro, *queso*") including several Spanish words that are recognizable to many of the restaurants' patrons. The words listed in Spanish are either, like *guajillo*, the names of chilies (*poblano*, *serrano*), or have become extremely familiar in the American consciousness (*queso*, which means cheese). As in the previous example, the central ingredient to the taco, which is

employed in the title with its Spanish name, is defined in English in the description (*chorizo* becomes “pork sausage”). Here, while the Spanish name renders the material nature of the taco more authentic by referencing the indexical connotations of the particular regionally specific linguistic form, the redefinition of the Spanish term in English works to edit and sanitize the heritage called upon. In other words, by defining the taco in English, a distance is maintained from the heritage that is evoked; the cuisine and culture of this imagined Mexican (or at the very least Latino) heritage is appreciated and employed for its “authenticity,” the heritage is rendered accessible and safe for American consumption. The regional heritage evoked by the linguistic forms present in Supernova’s menu seems to be more complex than a Mexican national heritage (though as noted in an earlier section, this too is a complicated matter); menu items such as “The Walking Taco”, “Vegetables *en Escabeche*”, and “Queso Fundido” indicate a trans-border heritage that includes the borderlands of the American south. Not only are these menu items inspired by dishes that arose from these areas, the switch in linguistic form—from a Spanish dish name to one that is in English (“The Walking taco”) or a mix of Spanish and English (“Vegetables *en Escabeche*”) alters the chronotopic heritage that is indexed to include the American south.

### *Commodifying coolness*

A final framework explored in the first section of this paper looks at placemaking as employed to give value and authenticity to objects and commodities (Coles & Crang 2011). A placemaking-focused approach investigates the ways in which the cultivation of spaces of retailing and consuming contributes to the value of commodities. Here, certain aesthetics work to index heritages or types of values; importantly, aesthetics of “displacement” work to link these spaces of consumption with other places, especially those of production; this framework

foregrounds the importance of intertextuality. When applied to Supernova, the notion of placemaking helps to show how the tacos, and the experience, are given value and situated as authentic.

The physical space of Supernova is important to the consumption experience. As described above, the space draws in elements that recall the origins of the Mexican-American taco: the taco truck is an immediately obvious spatial element that evokes the production of the food item commodified. The presence of the taco truck works to index the production of tacos and, in turn, the authenticity of the tacos and the experience. The material presence of the taco truck recalls the social life of the taco, as discussed above, as well as the labor and relationships of production integral to the material form of the taco, also discussed above. In this situation, the aesthetics of displacement index the origins of production of the taco for the consumer, in turn rendering Supernova's tacos "authentic" to the narrative of heritage, and production that is imagined by the consumer.

Other aspects of the space work to create authenticity and give value to the food in other ways. The restaurant brings together many disparate elements: tacos and other Mexican-American food, margaritas and other Mexican tequila cocktails, Kentucky bourbon, honkytonk music and vinyl records, spaces that are at once industrial, outdoors, bar-like, modern, and comfortable. These elements are seemingly unrelated, but ultimately work together to create a space that can only be described as "cool". While elements of the space work to create authenticity by indexing production and cultural histories, other elements work to create authenticity by calling upon coolness. Bar manager Andre describes the space and evokes this element of coolness:

It's very much a visual and also a social destination. It has that instant feel of, it's like that worn in couch that immediately gives you that feeling when you like walk in and I I hear it from all the regulars, I don't know what it is I just walk in and I'm instantly comfortable. And I'm like I do

know what it is, you've been here multiple times uh it's a warm inviting environment, it's very sparse so from people that means generally bringing your own mental frame of reference for it. Uh if you walk into a place that's overly designed, and hits you with sensory information? It either jives with you or battles your own perception.

Here, Andre begins to put into words what this coolness, this vibe cultivated by Supernova, actually does; this coolness gives authority to the producers in the restaurant. In a space that indexes coolness, producers manufacture a certain level of credibility that legitimates claims of authenticity. In other words, by creating a space that draws on intertextual aesthetics of coolness, Supernova is able to achieve an authority that allows them to designate their tacos as authentic.

### **Narratives of authenticity at Supernova**

In this final section, I develop an understanding of how the notion of authenticity is purposefully conceived and employed by producers at Supernova. In this thesis I am ultimately interested in understanding the ways in which objects/food come to be understood as “authentic.” In the section above, I apply the theoretical frameworks explored in the first portion of the paper to my own fieldwork in a hip taco restaurant in Chicago. In this section I focus on how “authenticity” is applied and commodified in this setting. I seek to understand the ways in which an authenticity is constructed in order to provide value to the food served at Supernova and to the dining experience.

#### *Traditions, techniques, and ingredients*

I have found that producers at Supernova do employ notions of authenticity in the cultivation of the menu and the dining experience. While these producers may in fact aim to create tacos that are authentic, more important is the cultivation of a narrative of authenticity. As seen above, the creation of authentic tacos is nearly impossible, as the taco has different elements, connotations, and histories throughout time and space; moreover, the authentic



heritage that Supernova attempts to index is complicated and muddled as tacos on the menu hail from various regions and influences, and the restaurant cultivates disparate elements including Kentucky bourbon and honkytonk vinyl records. From an academic standpoint, the authentic heritage that Supernova attempts to cultivate seems to be a trans-border amalgamation that relies heavily on sanitized representations of the American south (this accounts for the presence of Kentucky Bourbon, honkytonk, and Cal-Mex tacos). Crucial here though is the narrative of authenticity that runs through the language and actions of producers at Supernova.

Producers at Supernova (e.g. owners, chefs, beverage managers) employ the notion of authenticity in narratives surrounding various aspects of the restaurant, including branding, menus, and ambience. As producers construct the restaurant and give meaning to the food, they employ the notion of authenticity in complex ways; those working at Supernova actually construct the concept of authenticity itself as they seek to employ these notions of authenticity. The conception of authenticity producers at Supernova seek to index in their restaurant is one that is primarily concerned with adherence to the traditions imagined as belonging to an imagined heritage. Ultimately, this focus by Supernova on evoking the traditions involved in the cultural production of an imagined heritage involves the reproduction of two aspects: techniques and ingredients.

In interviews, newly appointed head chef James Horne spoke about the menu, the mission of the restaurant, and his own education. These interviews also illustrate the notion of authenticity employed by Supernova; as a producer at Supernova, James constructs the notion of authenticity as referring primarily to adherence to the traditions of an imagined heritage group. He identifies the cuisine at Supernova as authentic to both Californian taco trucks and Oaxacan cuisine:

It's it's [the executive chefs], their, their foundation for this was, kind of, California Mexican tacos off the backs of trucks, very authentic, crafted by hand, um, but the authenticity actually stems from Oaxaca, which is a middle state in Mexico.

Here, James traces the cuisine at Supernova back to certain imagined heritages. He also begins to define the concept of authenticity as following the traditions imagined as uniformly integral to the cuisine of these heritages. He explains that when he was hired as chef de cuisine at Supernova, he was inexperienced in the world of Mexican cuisine; the executive chefs began to advise his education by recommending cookbooks and mentors. James highlights the influence of Diana Kennedy on his recent quest to learn and produce authentic Mexican cuisine; Diana Kennedy is a renowned “authority” on Mexican cuisine who has spent the past forty-five years travelling in Mexico in order to learn and chronicle local cuisines, and has worked to disseminate knowledge of these cuisine through numerous cookbooks, classes, and lecture series. Diana Kennedy focuses on uncovering “authentic” cuisines, often censuring the presence of items deemed Americanized, including even chips and salsa; her work has been criticized by scholars and chefs such as Arellano (2013), who critiques her tendency to push her version of Mexican cuisine that she deems authentic while dismissing other cuisines, often created by Latinos, as inauthentic. Supernova’s model of authenticity seems to fall in line with Kennedy’s:

[The executive chefs asked] what's your experience with Mexican food? And I said, staff meal, with employees at other restaurants I've work at. And that, for me, for them, I'm a blank canvas to work with, and say hey, go read Dianne Kennedy's books ... I'm you know learning a lot of Mexican cuisine obviously, um so I'm not reading, I'm not necessarily reading Rick Bayless' books, Rick is great, love him. It's his take on things. I'm reading all of Diana Kennedy's books. Who is quoted as the Rick Bayless of Oaxaca. That's her specialty. So like that's what I'm trying to do is, is, read about her time and travels and adventures in [Oaxaca].

Here, James’ and Supernova’s construction of authentic Mexican cuisine is informed by chefs such as Diana Kennedy, and therefore engages with a narrative of authenticity that focuses on imagined traditions.

James goes on to suggest that this definition of authenticity (as following the traditions of an imagined regional heritage) includes employing specific ingredients and techniques imagined as traditional to a reified heritage. James notes the significance of the ingredients used by Supernova, explaining that the restaurant only uses ingredients that are used in Mexican cuisine and specifically in Oaxaca:

Who is using what chiles and it's based on geographical locations, and temperature and all stuff like that, you know, we have obviously garbage bags filled with chiles that we process and work with on a daily basis, but if guajillos weren't used in Oaxacan cuisine? They wouldn't be in the kitchen. So that's, the authenticity of it, we're not just pulling things because they taste good. We're pulling things because they figured out how to do it, we're giving our interpretation of it. And it's not a shitty interpretation. It's not like let's throw something weird local to Midwest on it ... And I can do that like when I run specials I can have more all the fun I want doing that but the actual menu items are taken very seriously in terms of, why did we put this chili in the marinade, why did you use this technique for braising the chicken and not another technique.

Here, James underscores the importance to Supernova of utilizing ingredients local to Oaxaca. This desire translates to the desire to index an imagined regional heritage; by using chiles local to Oaxaca, Supernova attempts to recall what producers imagine to be the authentic cuisine of the region. Moreover, this work references a conception of authenticity that privileges reliance upon an imagined regional heritage; ingredients that would be used in this imagined chronotopic heritage are deemed more authentic than ingredients found elsewhere—which could in fact be used in a taco. Examples of ingredients classified as inauthentic range from those that are local to area of production (Illinois) or ingredients that draw from other food traditions (such as the Korean Beef tacos that are gaining popularity in Chicago and elsewhere). Ironically, this propensity—to idealize ingredients that are deemed authentic and reject those ingredients that do not reinforce a definition of authenticity dependent upon the imagination of a specific regional heritage—fails to recognize the varied origins of ingredients now deemed as authentic; recall here the origins of pork used in *al pastor* as influenced by Lebanese shawarma. The example of the *al pastor* taco emphasizes another aspect important to the narrative of authenticity employed

by Supernova: the use of traditional techniques. The transcript excerpt above also speaks to this component of the conception of authenticity employed by Supernova. Here, as with ingredients, Supernova employs their notion of authenticity by using techniques that are imagined as belonging to the traditions of this imagined Mexican or Oaxacan heritage. Again, this conception of authenticity excludes techniques employed in other places that do not fit into this imagined regional heritage, even if Mexicans employ these techniques. Ultimately, the authenticity highlighted by James and employed by Supernova is one that privileges adherence to a certain type of imagined heritage-based traditions. This definition of the authentic taco is one that highlights a certain linear and static conception of history and heritage.

#### *Politics of production*

As noted above, the conception of authenticity employed by Supernova relies on notions of traditions, techniques, and ingredients; this narrative of authenticity also deals with production. The conception of authenticity employed here includes a complex narrative of production that delineates who should be producing—or more specifically, who is imagined to be producing in an imagined regional heritage—but does not designate food as authentic based solely upon the identities of producers.

As noted above, producers at Supernova link authentic Mexican cuisine to the imagined heritage of Oaxaca; the traditions of those cooks in an imagined Oaxaca delineate what is deemed authentic. Here, the identity of producers of the cuisine that is to be emulated is critical to the notion of authenticity. Moreover, beyond the conception of the original imagined producers as Mexican, and more specifically Oaxacan, producers at Supernova further nuance this identity by linking the cuisine with poverty. James explains this facet:

[Oaxaca is the] poorest state in Central America and ... [it's] such great cultured cuisine, with no financial backing, and people who can barely afford to eat for themselves ... Yeah, very very talented people.

Here, the cuisine is imagined as stemming from scarcity; the cuisine that is situated as the model for traditions employed by Supernova is imagined as originating from impoverished but innovative producers. It is important to note an imagination of these producers as destitute; whether this is true or not, this narrative defines identities of production. Notably, this narrative of production does indicate an appreciation for the imagined originators of a food tradition that is reified as authentic, as it focuses on impressive creation under difficult conditions. It is possible, though perhaps a stretch, to view this appreciation of producers in conditions of poverty as translating into a desire to build the restaurant on the “premise of affordability” As explained by beverage manager Andre:

We've largely survived on and done really well on that premise of affordability ... [the cocktails] are now nine [dollars], but that's after tax, so really most cocktails there are eight bucks and change, which considering you're getting a house-made old fashioned often with a barrel selected for the bar, uh it's all fresh juices, um everything is outside of the margaritas it's service built by hand, um it's an extremely affordable concept ... Um and you can meet your friends there and you can pay the bill and not worry about it because it won't ever be that much.

This concept of affordability can be likened to a narrative of production that includes an emphasis on poverty. However, it is important to acknowledge the tension that exists between the imagined producers that are construed in the development of a concept of authenticity and the current site of production at Supernova; while the tacos and margaritas at Supernova may be labeled affordable, they are by no means affordable for the underprivileged imagined producers of the cuisine. In addition, this conflict draws into focus the actual producers of the cuisine at Supernova.

The owners, executive chefs, chef de cuisine, managers, and waitstaff at Supernova are not the imagined producers that are reified in the creation of a regional authenticity employed by

Supernova; they are well-known and well-off restaurateurs and chefs, and young, hip, and often white staff. Here, there is a disconnect between the narrative of production that is imagined elsewhere and the real production that exists at Supernova. Yet many of the kitchen staff are knowledgeable Latino cooks whom other producers respect. James explains:

You know, every, to me it's almost disgraceful to, here, not take the food as seriously as it needs to be taken, for the fact that I have twelve women on my staff that are here five days a week, hour after hour, on their feet hand pressing tortillas ... They, the heart, you know, they make this place go ... [The kitchen staff is] it's you know ninety-nine percent Latinos and they they've all been here a lot longer than me. Um you know it's something it's something that like you know, they're doing this major volume of prep but they also know that it's quality ingredients and quality food ... [they care about it], and it shows.

Importantly, most of the cooks actually creating the tacos that feed Supernova patrons are Latinos; moreover, their identity as well as the quality of their work warrants them respect. However, in the narrative of authenticity employed at Supernova, the identity of the producer does not automatically render the cuisine authentic. This is to say that according to the narrative of authenticity created by Supernova, even the identity of a producer of cuisine as a poor Oaxacan cook would not ensure authenticity if the taco was not prepared according to imagined heritage-based traditions. James explains this framework with an anecdote:

Going to [a hole in the wall, family owned Mexican restaurant] every once in a while and getting great fucking margaritas, great you know, their swirls and, their food's good! It might not necessarily be the most authentic thing in the world just because Latinos are cooking it? But it's good. It's consistent.

Again, the narratives of production and authenticity employed by Supernova do not assign authenticity to food based solely upon the identity of its producers; food must be prepared according to imagined heritage-based traditions that include ingredients and techniques, but belonging to this heritage as a producer is not enough to warrant authenticity. This narrative of authenticity situates authenticity as inorganic; those from whose heritage the cuisine evolved do not necessarily create criteria for authenticity, but they are instead imposed by more powerful producers that imagine a heritage with a certain set of traditions.

## **Concluding thoughts**

This paper has explored the ways in which producers give food meaning. I understand food as a material object and commodity that has a social life in which human users (eaters) bend and consolidate meanings. Producers attach meanings to the specific material qualities of food (through semiotics) and alter it through linguistic forms (through linguistic materiality). Meaning is also created and reinforced through intertextual placemaking. The notion of authenticity plays deeply into a discussion of meaning and food; producers often construct and employ authenticity to give meaning to food. Authenticity is understood as a construct that producers employ as they create and call upon an imagined regional heritage in order to give meaning and value to food.

I have explored the taco as a case study to understand these processes. At Supernova, a Cal-Mex and Oaxacan inspired taco restaurant located in a hip, gentrified neighborhood in Chicago, tacos are loaded with meaning, and notions of authenticity are employed in complex ways. Tacos possess a rich social life, in which their material form has evolved, and meanings associated with tacos have changed; moreover, the material properties of the taco itself are imbued with social histories and meanings. At Supernova, the social history of the taco is largely ignored as producers reify specific moments and locations. Producers at Supernova employ a narrative of authenticity that relies upon a specific imagined moment in the social history of the taco. Supernova attempts to index authenticity by highlighting imagined regional heritage-based traditions that manifest in the form of techniques and ingredients. Supernova indexes this heritage through linguistic markers and placemaking.

Ultimately, the narrative of authenticity employed by producers at Supernova works to index both a timeless rural Oaxaca and a sanitized southern America that includes the most accessible and commodifiable aspects of this regional experience (tacos, music, drink) while

erasing the history and complexities of each of these aspects. Moreover a narrative of production that emphasizes poverty of producers, but refuses the power of authentic value to these producers works to further erase these histories and complexities by appropriating the “Other” and shutting them out of the decision-making process. In erasing these histories, producers at Supernova act to essentially re-silence Mexicans in Chicago. Ultimately, it seems that “authentic” heritage no longer belongs to an ethnic population, but remains fixed to a time and place; the experience of the immigrant is divorced from the authentic experience that is commodified and eaten in Chicago kitchens.



## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> This pseudonym is given to protect the identity of interlocutors.

<sup>ii</sup> This pseudonym is given to protect the identity of the interlocutor.

<sup>iii</sup> This pseudonym is given to protect the identity of the interlocutor.

<sup>iv</sup> This pseudonym is given to protect the identity of the interlocutor.

## TACO AL PASTOR

marinated, spit roasted pork shoulder, grilled pineapple, grilled onion, cilantro .4.

## TACO DE PANZA

crispy, braised pork belly, tomato guajillo sauce, queso fresco, onion, cilantro .4.

## Taco de Papas con Rajas

potatoes, rajas chipotle, queso cotija, onion, cilantro .3.

## TACO DE PESCADO

beer battered tilapia fillet, chipotle mayo, cabbage, red onion, lime, cilantro .4.

## Taco de Pollo Pibil

chicken thighs steamed in banana leaves, achiote and citrus marinade, pickled red onion, cilantro .3.

## TACO de ZANAHORIAS

mole spiced carrots, chipotle date yogurt, pumpkin and sesame seeds, almond, cilantro .3.

## TACO DE CHORIZO VERDE

pork sausage, poblano, serrano, pumpkin and sesame seeds, potato, onion, cilantro, queso .3.



## THE WALKING TACO

corn chips, spicy pinto bean dip, tamazula salsa, crema, queso chihuahua, onion, cilantro .3.

## TOSTADA de HONGOS

stewed mushrooms, fresh tomato and serrano salsa, poblano pepper, goat cheese, marinated summer greens .4.

## QUESO FUNDIDO

melted queso Chihuahua, rajas poblano, housemade chorizo, fresh tortillas .9.

## FRIJOLES CHARROS

stewed pinto beans, bacon, poblano pepper, tomato, onion, cilantro, queso fresco, fresh tortillas .4.

## ENSALADA DE BIG STAR

hearts of romaine, radish, black bean, cucumber, red onion, avocado, toasted pumpkin seeds, mint, queso fresco, chile-ranch dressing .8.

## CHIPS

fresh fried tortilla chips .3.

## CHIPS & GUACAMOLE

avocado, lime, onion, serrano pepper, cilantro .8.

## VEGETABLES en ESCABECHE

pickled vegetables .1.

## CHILES TORREADOS

grilled, salted jalapeno peppers .1.

BIG STAR HOT SAUCE .1.

SIDE OF CREMA .1.

## DULCE DE LECHE LICUADO

dulce de leche milkshake .4.

## HORCHATA

cinnamon and almond flavored rice drink .3.

## LIMEADE

lime flavored agua fresca .3.





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