

NOT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD TACO TRUCK?:
A CRITICAL URBAN FUTURES STUDY OF MOBILE FOOD VENDING
IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of
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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographically informed critical urban study is concerned with local resident perspectives about the significance and possible futures of street food vending in San Antonio, Texas. San Antonio is one of the most populous and fastest growing cities in the United States (US), and it is perceived by some to be a bellwether for future urban development due to the city's longstanding majority Mexican American population and the changing demographic profile of the state and nation. Less commonly noted is the history of San Antonio vending practices influencing national and global foodways, from *chile con carne* (beef chili) to sports stadium nacho chips and cheese sauce. Additionally, San Antonio has a complex history of socioeconomic bifurcation, discrimination and spatial inequality, which are evident in some of the city's street food vending practices.

Employing a multilayered and reflexive approach that includes interviews and observation, this study focused on publicly accessible larger vehicle-based (food truck) vending in San Antonio in 2014 and 2015. Vending practices inspired by the national and now global food truck movement since the 2008 Great Recession have been categorized by some San Antonians as gourmet (or foodie, branded or professional) and separate from traditional working-class practices described as neighborhood (or Mexican, unbranded or taco).

In this thesis, I argue that some critical literature and popular depictions of food truck vending in the US have marked neighborhood (working-class and affordable) vending as undesirable and static or stagnant compared to the purportedly more innovative and healthful gourmet (more expensive) food truck trend. Accordingly, I extend the critical literature by demonstrating the capacity of neighborhood vending in San Antonio to be adaptive and creative in response to complex urban conditions and to shape local gourmet and other vending practices.

This thesis makes a distinct contribution to critical urban studies by using food truck vending in San Antonio as a vehicle for perceiving trends towards socioeconomic (re)stratification and the curtailing of class mixing or blurring in the US, and related

patterns of gentrification. These patterns include *vendrification*—the upscaling of street vending, and *gente-fication*—or gentrification practiced by affluent Latina/o populations and sometimes incorporating versions of ethnic foods, as might be epitomized in San Antonio by the expensive taco or *raspa*. The final contribution of the thesis is to identify directions for additional San Antonio-focused research related to mobile food vending, city futures, urban marginality and Latina/o urbanisms.