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# Antigua, Guatemala, Street Food Vendors

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**Abstract:** : Based on long-term ethnographic research on livelihood practices in urban public spaces, I explore street food politics in Antigua, Guatemala. From various subjective vantage points, I describe the food vendors themselves, the handicraft vendors who constitute their primary clients, tourists who only by chance encounter them when purchasing handicrafts, and the city officials who are responsible for regulating the streets. I analyze the reasons why some food vending practices are permitted, despite regulations against them. Drawing on a theoretical framework that articulates Lefebvre's (1996) and Harvey's (2012) positions on rights to cities, I explain why such street food vendors persist in a highly regulated UNESCO World Heritage Site. I argue that claims of rights are not merely organized political actions but are exercised in the everyday practices of those who live and work on the street. Drawing on the concept of "gray space" from Yiftachel (2009) and shades of graying from Heyman and Smart (1999), I highlight the ambiguous social spaces and physical places that food vending and consumption takes place, to described what I call spatial permissibility, the practicing of ambiguously legal/illegal work in these gray and graying spaces.

**Keywords:** street food, urban politics, rights to the city, Guatemala.

**Resumen:** : Basado en una investigación etnográfica a largo plazo sobre prácticas de medios de vida en espacios públicos urbanos, exploro la política de comida callejera en Antigua Guatemala. Desde varios puntos de vista subjetivos, describo los propios vendedores de alimentos, los vendedores de artesanías que constituyen sus principales clientes, los turistas que solo los encuentran por casualidad al comprar artesanías y los funcionarios de la ciudad que son responsables de regular las calles. Analizo las razones por las cuales se permiten algunas prácticas de venta de alimentos, a pesar de las regulaciones en su contra. Basándome en un marco teórico que articula las posiciones de Lefebvre (1996) y Harvey (2012) sobre los derechos a las ciudades, explico por qué estos vendedores ambulantes de alimentos persisten en un sitio del Patrimonio Mundial de la UNESCO altamente regulado. Sostengo que las reclamaciones de derechos no son meras acciones políticas organizadas, sino que se ejercen en las prácticas cotidianas de quienes viven y trabajan en la calle. Basándome en el concepto de "espacio gris" de Yiftachel (2009) y los tonos de gris de Heyman y Smart (1999), destaco los espacios sociales ambiguos y los lugares físicos en los que tiene lugar la venta y el consumo de alimentos, para describir lo que llamo permisibilidad espacial, la práctica del trabajo ambiguamente legal/ilegal en estos espacios grises y grises.

**Palabras clave:** comida callejera, política urbana, derechos a la ciudad, Guatemala.

## Introduction

Oralia has just arrived in Antigua's main Central Plaza with her large basket covered with a colorful, hand-woven cloth. Its designs identify her town, San Antonio Aguas Calientes, that is renowned by locals and foreign tourists alike for its intricate hand-woven textiles. The town is

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not known for its cuisine, though residents are particularly proud of their versions of chow mien and *pepian*, a sauce made of roasted peppers and tomatoes. She often serves these dishes to her customers in the plaza.

On this typically sunny midday, sitting on park benches or clustering together in front of the well-known mermaid fountain, Maya handicraft vendors sell items to foreign tourists. Other vendors position themselves to show beautiful textiles to tourists coming and going to the cathedral on plaza's east side or leaving restaurants on the opposite side. School kids hang out on one corner of the plaza and joke with each other before heading home for lunch. Assorted others—workers, businesspersons, police officers, American and European ex-patriates, and out-of-town Guatemalans—pass through, pause and chat with friends, rest on benches, or intently study their smart phones. It is a busy time of day, irrespective of the day of the week. Oralia, like always, closely watches this activity.

Most people in the plaza, which is commonly called *el parque central* or, merely, *el parque* by locals, do not pay attention to Oralia, as she and Andrea, the teenage girl who assists her, rest the heavy cloth-covered basket on the ground at the edge of one main crossways through the plaza. On the bench next to me, a couple of tourists on a holiday to Mexico and Guatemala, who I learn later are from Australia, take notice of Oralia, watching her and Andrea remove rectangular Styrofoam plates, paper napkins, and plastic cutlery out of the basket and place them on a *su't* in Kaqchikel Maya, a colorful striped cloth similar to that which covers the basket. When Oralia lifts the edge of the cloth covering the basket, a cloud of steam escapes. The tourists' interest is clearly piqued, noticing that they are not yet more handicraft vendors. They watch more closely to learn what Oralia and the girl are doing.

The handicraft vendors slowly drift over to Oralia, individually or in groups of two or three, asking her what is for lunch. On this day, the choices are *pepian de pollo* and *pepian de cerdo*, both served with rice, and chow mien, which is made with chicken and a variety of vegetables. Andrea, who had run off in a hurry, returns with a basket filled with fresh, handmade corn tortillas that will accompany these dishes. The two work quickly, yet jovially, as they fill orders at a cost of Q10 per plate, unless the customer wants extra tortillas, which raises the price to Q12, roughly US\$1.50. They call their customers by name, joking with some and asking others how family members are doing.

The tourists next to me wonder what the food tastes like, if it is good, if it is safe to eat. They have been warned—by other tourists and their guidebook—not to eat street food, that in Guatemala it is especially dangerous because of dirty water supplies and inadequate sanitation. Still, they are curious about the food. So, I explain that Oralia and Andrea are serving *pepian*, a savory sauce made from roasted peppers, tomatoes, onions, and a number of different spices, with chicken or pork on rice. They know that *pepian* is a traditional Guatemalan dish, but it is the only one they have heard of. The man asks, "Pepian would be Guatemala's national dish, right? We should probably try it." I offer to get them a

plate from Oralia. He laughs nervously and the woman says judiciously, “Maybe you could recommend a good, safe restaurant.”

While we talk, Andrea is darting off to other parts of the plaza, carrying plates of food to handicraft vendors and, curiously, even a police officer, the very person who is charged with prohibiting street sales of food and handicrafts in public places. As the tourists speculate more about the food—if it tastes good and if it is spicy, I notice that Oralia and Andrea are also serving random other locals who work at the banks and telephone company offices, located on the plaza.

Oralia sees me, waves me over and jokes that I have not eaten with her in years. Indeed, I have not. For about four years, I regularly ate hers and her sister’s meals while I conducted dissertation and follow-up research on handicraft vendors in Antigua (Little, 2004). Sharing meals with vendors and learning the Kaqchikel Maya language did more to integrate me into the vendor community than anything else I did. At the same time, these very same food vendors are much maligned, not just by those working in the tourism industry and by local political officials but, also, by locals themselves who may even eat this food.

This article explores these food politics and discusses the reasons why such street food vendors persist in Antigua from a theoretical framework that articulates Lefebvre’s (1996) and Harvey’s (2012) positions on rights to cities in order to think about livelihood practices in urban public spaces and the reasons why some practices are permitted, despite regulations against them. For Lefebvre (1996: 156), cities are places in which their inhabitants struggled against existential threats of “social and cultural disintegration” that result in “holes and chasms” and he sees them as “the places of the possible.” Lefebvre explains the right to the city is the “right to urban life” to which “working class can become the agent, the social carrier or support of this realizations (1996: 158). This attention to the working class, like those street vendors and their customers that I discuss here, situated firmly in the social places and spaces of the city, unlike elites who are, according to Lefebvre (1996: 159), “are everywhere and nowhere.” Similarly, Harvey (2012: xiii) argues that the right to the city, “primarily rises up from the streets” and is a political space of resistance and rebellion. In his book, *Rebel Cities*, Harvey describes the central roles that the poor, homeless, laborers, and others play in laying claim to their collective right to live and work in the city, at what I consider as basic as the level of the street. He explains that this means “to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade” (Harvey, 2012: 5).

For my purposes, here, such claims of rights are not merely expressed via spontaneous or organized political manifestations but through everyday practices of those who live and work on the street. They are those who work from “the places of the possible” that can be ambiguously legal (or illegal). Hence, I draw on the concept of “gray space” from Yiftachel (2009) and shades of graying from Heyman and Smart (1999), to highlight the ambiguous social spaces and physical places that food vending and consumption takes place. However, and in contrast to

Yiftachel, I demonstrate that street food sales and consumption are permitted, not only on the urban and political margins, but in cities' most central places. This is practicing of gray spaces and graying is what I refer to elsewhere as spatial permissibility, irrespective of the often, unclear legal status that street vending and other forms of urban street work take.

## Public Street Food Practices

In the now 30 plus years that I have conducted field research in Antigua, most street food vendors have been consistently maligned by city officials and local residents alike. Within tourism networks and by international tourists, Guatemalan street food tends to be looked upon negatively, as unhygienic, poorly prepared, and unhealthy. When I mentioned to tourists, to academic colleagues, and my Antigua resident friends, Antigüenos, that I was studying street food, their reactions were, overwhelmingly, that this was a dangerous and foolish endeavor. One commented quite pointedly, "Good luck in not getting sick".

I locate these attitudes about street food within the broader politics of street vending and dominant local discourses about vendors, the food sold, and those who consume it. While there are powerful discourses that the food is dangerous for reasons of health and safety, street food sales are persistent and, I argue, are necessary for the functioning of the local economy. Furthermore, some of those in charge of regulating public space and determining the safety of food are consumers themselves. This irony is not lost on them and other workers who dine on street food.

For all practical purposes, commercial activities on streets, plazas, and other public spaces is prohibited in the city codes. According to the Municipal Regulations<sup>[1]</sup> that prohibit the use of the public thoroughfares, including the Parque Central and national monuments, as specified in Municipal Code 16-95 (17 April 1995), for commercial activities. This includes food vendors. The regulations also make clear that exceptions may be granted and withdrawn at the discretion of the City Council. Typically, these are for temporary exhibits or items and services that are considered traditional. Those vendors of traditional goods and services who are granted permission to sell in public places may be allowed to do so indefinitely.

What is considered traditional in Antigua is the subject of much debate that can take on class and ethnic dimensions. In the broader economy of street commerce, watercolor artists are able to paint and sell their works in public spaces, often with police officers making sure they are safe. Recently, the mime, Estuardo Tacén Pérez, was recognized by the mayor for his contributions to art and culture as an actor and humorist who has enhanced Antigua's reputation as an artist-friendly place (Noticias de la Municipalidad de Antigua Guatemala, 17 de febrero, 2017).<sup>[2]</sup> Interestingly, Tacén Pérez's act on the Calle del Arco has been routinely shut down by the police. Shoe shiners sometimes are authorized to ply their trade in the plaza but not elsewhere, as are photographers and

tourism guides, provided that they have documentation (an ID card, for example) that identifies their occupation. Others, like a variety of toy vendors, are allowed to sell on weekends and holidays when there is a higher concentration of Guatemalan and Central American families visiting the city, as long as they restrict themselves to the designated car-free zones of the plaza and the Calle del Arco, which runs from the plaza to the La Merced church.

Unlike these street workers, food vendors and, especially, textile vendors are not generally regarded as traditional by local municipal authorities, irrespective of national and international attitudes about them. In fact, they have been prohibited from selling in public places, be they city streets or in the parque. They, also, tend to be the street workers who suffer the city authorities' most aggressive removal campaigns. Irrespective of this, they are a constant presence and can provide an interesting lens into the on-the-ground ways that people claim their places and exercise their rights to the city, as Lefebvre (1996) and then Harvey (2012) argued. From the perspectives of street food vendors and their lived practices, the right to the city rises not just from social movements, as Harvey (2012) argues but, also, from what I consider pragmatic struggles to make a livelihood. These may be considered individual acts of resistance (Scott 1989) to urban regulations and marginalization by more powerful political and economic elites but most street vendors have yet to collectively mobilize into a full-fledged social movement, as did handicraft street vendors (Little 2008; see Bhowmik 2005 for a review of Asia street vendor political organizing).

Before explaining why various kinds of street occupations are permitted and, more specifically, why some food vendors are able to maintain their businesses, it is important to review a few more aspects of the municipality's regulations and their enforcement. All regulations can be found on the city's webpages.<sup>[3]</sup> I want to be clear here that these are not the kinds of "progressive policies [that] create a 'market of dispossession' that in effect seeks to suck value out of a moral economy based on mutual respect and reciprocity, to the advantage of capitalist institutions" (Harvey, 2012: 20-21). Far from this, the regulations underly the legacies of racial and ethnocentric economic and political policies that have typified Guatemala. Rather, the acts of the street vendors in contradiction to the regulations can be viewed as a way to introduce mutual respect and reciprocity where these have been very present for Mayas or the poor.

In 2007 and, then, 2014, the regulations for street use were revised.

<sup>[4]</sup> What is important in these revisions is the clarification of fees for infractions, which are determined at the discretion of municipal judges and not by any other municipal authority, including the police. This significant change is most likely the result of ambulatory handicraft vendors who spent over a decade fighting the city for the right to sell on the streets or plazas. One of their early successes was to gain access to the street in front of the Carmen Church to sell on weekends (Little,



2008). A common complaint of the vendors, including a few food vendors that worked directly with the handicraft vendors, was that the police were indiscriminately seizing merchandise and fining them. Furthermore, the fees varied widely and did not seem to be based on any rational criteria. Additionally, with the seizure of their merchandise, they argued that they observed the police and some city officials re-selling their goods. The revisions to the regulations stipulate what is to be done with seized merchandise—cataloguing it and warehousing it for just fifteen days. If no claims are made on it, then, it is destroyed or donated to charity. Being able to identify the handicrafts has been a challenge for the handicraft vendors, except now many have smartphones and they take photos of their goods and the police officers. Despite this effort, few have successfully retrieved their handicrafts. For food vendors, who likewise try to document police seizures of their food on their smartphone cameras, there is no expectation that they will recover their food. It gets thrown away.

Residents, tourists, and municipal authorities all tend to agree that street food is, in general, dangerous, except that which they eat. These attitudes are complemented by sensationalist news articles about street vendors selling dog meat, which is illegal (Ramirez, 2019), and the regular publication of news articles about the municipality's position that street food is a health hazard (Patzán, 2019; Sicán, 2017). One recent study of street food in Antigua (Cedillo Gámez de Barrios, 2017) concludes that unsanitary conditions are due to the lack of clean water, efficient removal of waste, and the way in which food is handled, among other poor health and food preparation practices. Interestingly enough, rather than recommend the draconian removal of vendors, the approach the city utilizes with regularity he calls for the development of infrastructure that would improve the sanitary conditions. This complements research done in Mexico (Montes de Oca Barrera, 2018) and elsewhere (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2002), where street food is perceived as a significant way to help improve the nutrition and, in contrast, make the argument that it is sanitary.

Most recently, the municipal government passed an agreement (Acuerdo 45-2018) on 14 August 2018 that prohibits the use and distribution of plastic utensils, bags, straws, plates, glasses, and other disposable single-use plastics. Individual citizens using these items will be fined Q300 (US\$40). Persons, workers and owners, using these items for their businesses will be fined Q3,000 (US\$400). And those businesspersons who actively distribute single-use plastic items for commercial gain will be fined Q7,500 (US\$1000). Repeat offenders' fines can be doubled. The goal, effectively, is to ban plastics from Antigua.

Street food vendors see the plastic regulation as a way for the city to take direct aim at them. Many of them have struggled with the municipality to sell their food. Of the two criteria that have been used against them, health code violations and impeding pedestrian and automobile flows, many rely on plastic utensils and bags to carry and serve their food. Because they do not have access to water and the ability to wash the plates and utensils,

officials claimed their businesses were not hygienic and posed a health hazard. With disposable plasticware, the food vendors did not have to worry about washing dishes and customers did not have to stand around the vendor eating their meal and returning their plates and silverware to be washed.

As my friend José explained to me several years ago, “Using plastic is healthier and now my customers can get their bag of fruit or glass of juice and go back to work or sit in the parque, instead of standing in the street blocking traffic.” Over the more than fifty years since his now long-deceased father established a network of fruit carts in Antigua, José and his extended family of fruit sellers have been at the mercy of the arbitrary discretion of each mayor and city council to be able to sell. Under the Adolfo Vivar Marroquín (2008-2012), his family struggled to stay in business enduring lengthy periods of time being banned. His sister’s cart did not survive, and she went out of business. Other relatives went on to make money in other ways, until they could regain access to the streets. José, however, became more mobile and relied on connections he had made over the years with business owners and even the police, both of whom are his customers, to skirt the applications of the regulations. On my recent trip this past April 2019, he was still using plastic cups, straws, and bags. He knows that he could be fined Q3,000, but he is relying on the police to let him continue without suffering a fine. “If I have to give up plastic, then what?” he asked me. Answering his own question, he states, “I can’t ask my customers to bring their own bottle or bag. They wouldn’t buy from me. I’d lose my business.” Oralia also continues to use plastic and has yet to be fined. However, a Q3,000 fine would put her out of business and José would be challenged to stay in business, especially, if he were deemed a repeat offender.

Other food vendors expressed similar concerns, with the exception of vendors of *tamales*, *chuchitos*, and *tamalitos*. These foods, all variations of steamed maize dough with some kind of filling, come in their own natural wrapper—cornhusks, corn plant leaves, or plantain or banana leaves. These and a paper napkin are all that customers need. Besides, many of the ambulatory vendors sell to private houses and business where the residents or workers have their own plates and flatware. For vendors like Hector and Oralia, using such organic materials are impractical.

Although José and Oralia have managed to stay clear of police seizures and municipal fines, be they related to the regulations prohibiting all street sales, the blockage of thoroughfares, health codes, or the plastic ban, other street food vendors are not as fortunate. The municipality regularly publicizes missives, complete with photos, on its website about the enforcement of these street regulations (<http://muniantigua.gob.gt/reglamentos-municipales/>). Occasionally, the local media reports it too (Patzán, 2019; Ramirez, 2019; Sicán, 2017). Over the years, I have personally witnessed police officers take and dispose of food sold by these vendors.



## Urban Spatial Permissiveness and the Case of Street Food

Why is there an uneven application of the regulations and, more specifically, why do some street food vendors manage to avoid fines and seizures of their food? The answer does not rest only on how well connected a food vendor is to the local authorities. Nor does a vendor's success depend on the quality of the food they sell or whether it conforms to some notion of tradition or cultural or national heritage.

The food vendors who get to sell on Antigua's streets and plazas without suffering removal or fines are able to do so, precisely, because of how their businesses are linked to city regulations, the everyday practices of consumers and authorities, specific economic contexts, and local conventions of taste. This confluence of practices, attitudes, economy, and taste that play out with some urban street vendors being able to ply their trade gets at what I describe as urban spatial permissiveness. Spatial permissiveness is not special to street food vendors but, rather, an urban condition common to urban public economies where the gap between the regulations and what actually is practiced on the street.

The dynamics of everyday practices, when viewed from the distinctive socio-economic positions of street food vendors, reveals just how uneven spatial permissiveness can be, due to Antigua's gender, racial, and ethnic legacies. Kaqchikel Maya scholar, Cojtí Cuxil (1991; 1995; 1996; 1997) has written quite pointedly about these legacies and the impacts of Guatemala's specific colonial histories and geo-politics on Mayas. He and other Maya scholars (Cojti Cuxil, Son Chonay, Rodríguez Guaján, 2007; Montejo, 2005) have theorized ways in which Guatemala can move towards being a multi-national, pluralistic state. While my small case study cannot pretend to such grand ambitions, it suggests an on-the-ground urban functioning of the multinational state and provides a way to illustrate how the power of those in political control, non-Maya Ladinos, and those earning a living, Maya street food vendors, in this case, co-exist in a tense yet functioning ways. This, of course, does not mean gender, ethnicity, and class are erased. They are obvious, persistent, despite the rule of law and order that promises the removal of such street vendors because they are explicitly dangerous—unhygienic and impede traffic—and implicitly dangerous as indigenous men and women who transgress an urban place that is controlled by non-Mayas and imagined as a Ladino, not Maya place. (Error 1: La referencia Cojti Cuxil, Son Chonay, Rodríguez Guaján, 2007 debe estar ligada) (Error 2: El tipo de referencia Cojti Cuxil, Son Chonay, Rodríguez Guaján, 2007 es un elemento obligatorio) (Error 3: No existe una URL relacionada)

Roy's (2009) theory of a politics of inclusion works well with Yiftachel's (2009) gray spaces to help problematize the spaces where street food vendors conduct business and certainly illustrate how their commercial endeavors challenge formal-informal economic frameworks. For Roy, the contexts are unbridled urban growth by the poor and marginalized residents, in which there is a lack of sanctioned development and planning. It is illegal in the strictest sense, not unlike the flexible in-

between space of “extralegality” that Smart and Zerilli (2014) describe for Hong Kong. In Yiftachel’s case, the gray spaces are those that emerge between those that are white (legal, safe, officially sanctioned) and those that are black (illegal, dangerous, and unauthorized).

It would be easy to classify Antigua into Maya and Ladino spaces that correspond with Yiftachel’s gray space (2009) in which Roy’s (2009) politics of inclusion play out as compromises between formal regulations and informal practices. However, as I will illustrate below, while Roy and Yiftachel are dealing with largely marginalized people in marginalized urban places, the Maya food vendors under discussion here, occupy and work in distinctly Ladino spaces, the Central Plaza and the Calle del Arco that, for example, are central symbolic, economic, and political spaces power. For sure, Maya street food vendors are not the only street food vendors who sell in these central places, but they are conceived of as non-Mayan social and economic spaces, even anti-Mayan and anti-Maya spaces. What these others share with their Maya counterparts are class and gender, making them also poor women who transgress a male Ladino space. Admittedly, Antigua elected a woman mayor, Susana Asencio, for two terms (2012-2020), but the city’s identity remains male and non-Maya, a topic that I cannot go into detail here but have addressed elsewhere (Little, 2004).

One particular sector of street food vendors that has successfully carved out a secure place to run their businesses has done so by occupying a niche serving food to handicraft marketplace and ambulatory handicraft vendors. I have touched on these vendors in other publications (Little, 2004; 2014; 2015) but have not made them a central ethnographic subject. Rather than survey that wide range of street food vendors in operation in the city, I will focus on three different vendors: Oralia, Juana, and Bertilia. All three women are Kaqchikel Maya, all three began their food selling businesses in the Compañía de Jesús artisan marketplace in the late 1980s, and all survived the closure of the marketplace in 2003, and its move to its current location behind the Pollo Campero restaurant on the edge of the city.

In order to understand the successes of these three women street food vendors, it is important to make some observations about Antigua with respect to workers in the tourism sector and, more generally, those who earn a wage providing other important skills. Minimum wages<sup>[5]</sup> in Guatemala are set by law and adjusted by economic sector. For example, for agriculture workers and other unskilled labor, the wage is Q11.27 per hour (roughly US\$1.50). For those working in factories, the wage is even lower, Q10.30 per hour. Urban centers throughout Guatemala, but especially, in tourism destinations like Antigua and Panajachel, are filled with people who have given up on making even these low wages that do not provide enough to cover living expenses, in order to carve out a niche selling some service or item on the street to tourists and locals. I have met very few individuals who claimed to have made the official minimum wage when employed.

Living in Antigua is expensive and few street workers, with the exceptions of those whose families have been residents for generations and a few watercolor artists, make enough money to rent an apartment and pay for food. Many come from surrounding villages, commuting daily, and others from more distant places sleep in small rooms in the outskirts of the historic zone of the city that they rent by day, week, or month. The conditions in most instances are deplorable. Even in a place like Antigua that holds some promise for better wages and opportunities in comparison to the economic conditions of the countryside, it is not difficult to see why many rural Guatemalans emigrate.

One of the daily, pragmatic dilemmas of the typical working person in Antigua, not just for those who work on the street but, also, those who are employed by banks, boutiques, the municipality, hotels, and a myriad of other jobs, is how to afford lunch and have the time to eat it. For those working in the historic center, the five-block walk to municipal market and the intense heat in the *comedor* (diner) section, make it impractical, even though the meals are in the more affordable Q15-25 range when compared to a meal in a restaurant, which tend to begin at Q70-80 (roughly \$10) for a too small amount to be satisfying.

Oralia, Juana, and Bertilia recognized these economic dynamics some time ago in the 1980s when there were a significantly greater number of *comedores* scattered throughout the historic zone. Today, there are only a couple left, in what would be considered the edges of this zone, serving meals-of-the-day for around Q30. They, also, were connected via family to the artisan markets and street vendors selling handicrafts and could see the challenges that their relatives and others from their town, San Antonio Aguas Calientes, faced in order to get a meal. Oralia joked once that she and her sister, Hortencia, do “not have the skill to weave or patience to sell” to be artisans or vendors, but she and Hortencia did know how to cook. The proof, said Hortencia, was her husband, Everardo, an obese man who would sing praises of his wife’s and sister-in-law’s skills in the kitchen. Oralia and Hortencia pooled their resources and commissioned an extended family member with a pickup truck to drive them to the artisan marketplace with the food they prepared. When all was running on schedule, they could go from their kitchen in San Antonia to the marketplace in Antigua in less than a half hour and be serving lunch to hungry vendors.

The numbers of their customers grew because of the combination of price, quality, and location. Then, the market was located in the ruins of the Compañía de Jesús, just a block from the Central Plaza and it was an easy walk for those employed in the telephone company, city government, hotels, and banks in this area of the city. The inability to expand provided an opening for Bertilia and her daughters to start a similar food business, also using the Compañía de Jesús marketplace as the base of their operations. With the closure of this marketplace and its relocation to a site next to the municipal market with its relatively affordable *comedores*, these women’s businesses and livelihoods were threatened. Although they both continued to cater food to the new

artisan marketplace, their customer base was dramatically reduced with some handicraft vendors choosing to eat in the, now, nearby comedores, and the new artisan market was too far away for workers in the city center to walk to. During this period of relocation and reorganization of the artisan market and of all handicraft public selling places during the early 2000s, Hortencia and Everardo died, leaving Oralia the sole proprietor of their food business.

With Oralia facing mounting challenges of running the business on her own and a decline in her marketplace customers, she and her competitor, Bertilia, made a similar observation: that there seemed to be more street vendors and that the workers in the city center still did not have anywhere they could get a good, affordable meal. The restructuring of handicrafts sale locations throughout the city and the stricter enforcement of street vending regulations, as well as a number of other well-intentioned regulations to curb noise and cigarette smoking, had the opposite effect of what the city authorities intended. They led to an increase of street vendors, who decided that the benefits of selling on the street outweighed the costs of being fined and having their merchandise seized and impounded (see Little, 2008; 2015). It is debatable as to whether this is a rational decision on their part. Regardless, the influx of street vendors provided a potential opportunity for Oralia and Bertilia, as well as for Juana.

Each of these three women devised different strategies, knowing that they would be participating in an illegal activity, selling goods and services on the streets, and subject to the same fines and seizures as other vendors. They were well aware of many other street food vendors suffering the consequences of the regulation enforcement. While there are some key exceptions, like a family of street food vendors who have sold breakfast and lunch on the corner of 4 Calle Oriente and 1 Avenida Norte for, at least, 30 years, most street food restaurants and ambulatory street food vendors have short careers. Unlike Maya handicraft vendors who rely on tourists' affections for their colorful products and the exotic differences of clothing and language, the typical street food vendor is little more than a passing curiosity. Furthermore, handicraft vendors enjoy the support of restaurants, Spanish-language schools, and hotels, among other local businesses that purchase their goods and allow them to duck into their respective places of business when the police are enforcing street vending regulations.

Ambulatory street vendors, who are successful at selling and staying clear of police enforcement, in general, do so by cultivating regular customers from the local residential population and, largely, avoiding the business of tourists, be they Guatemalan or foreign. Oralia, Bertilia, and Juana have developed this strategy but diverge in others. Bertilia and Oralia continue to cater to the new artisan marketplace, however, they worked out a deal in which they sell on alternative days and only a couple of days each. The other days of the week, they cater to other customers with two dramatically different methods of serving their customers.

When Oralia decided to downsize her food business, she decided to focus on providing food to handicraft vendors selling in and near the plaza. She gets some others—those employees in businesses in the area and even a couple of police officers—but most are connections she made years ago when working with her sister in the original *Compañía de Jesús* artisan market. She aims to make just enough meals for her regular customers. Her operation is small. A relative with a pickup truck drops her and her assistant off at the Parque and may pick them up when the meals are served. Often, they just take a bus back to San Antonio, since they just have empty baskets and cloth coverings to carry. On weekends, she returns on afternoons to sell corn-on-the-cob to locals and tourists (Figure 1).

Four factors have contributed to the success and stability of her food business. First, is the overarching context of food economies in Antigua with a relatively high cost of restaurants in relation to wages. Her meals, sold in a Q10-Q20 range, are affordable for the typical worker, just as the restaurants are not. She provides a service that counteracts the constraints on workers' lunchtime options: limited time to eat and the prices of restaurant meals.

The second is that she has built a reliable and loyal customer base that includes workers and officials beyond handicraft vendors. Because perceptions of street food tend toward the negative, these customers and the relatively contained time she is in the plaza make it not worth the police's effort to shut her down. She reliably serves lunches four days per week and honors requests and suggestions from her more loyal customers.



**Figure 1**

Maya street food vendor selling elotes corn on the cob with lime to Maya handicraft vendors in the Central Plaza

The third is that she cultivates an obvious indigenous identity. This is, in part, because most of her clients are Kaqchikel, like her, and speaking their language and dressing as they do helps build confidence among them. It also identifies her to foreign tourists who are interested in seeing and interacting with Mayas. Effectively, she enjoys this touristic gaze and limited engagement by tourists that serves the handicraft vendors and protects them from the police enforcing regulations. Arresting someone who tourists can identify as a peaceful, minding-their-own-business Maya does nothing to promote Antigua positively.



The fourth reason that cannot be ignored is that Oralia's food is tasty and, I would argue, hygienic. In the past I enjoyed her food with regularity and appreciated being able to get a good meal that was distinctly Guatemalan. Although I have not tested the safety or cleanliness of her meals, the food does not sit out in the open air for hours. Street food vendors who work like this, coming out to sell for a limited number of reliable costumers, at specified and limited times, enjoy occupying a gray space, or rather, contribute to the graying of public spaces in the heart of Antigua. Similarly, there are other street food vendors who come to Antigua and sell prepared snacks mid-morning or mid-afternoon to local workers, other street vendors, and local school kids during breaks. This food is regarded as safe by consumers and authorities. At the same time, those street food vendors who wander the whole day looking for random customers are perceived as dangerous, serving low-quality, dirty food. As one local resident told me, "They make a pretty photo for tourists, but I wouldn't eat anything they made." In other words, vendors who are marginalized from the city's economic and political power because of their indigeneity, gender, and socio-economic status, effectively, reconfigure urban space, illustrating that Yiftachel's (2009) gray spaces are not necessarily relegated to the literal urban spatial peripheries and that the social processes of graying (Heyman, Smart, 1999) are located in everyday economic and social practices.

Unlike Oralia and Bertilia, Juana has dedicated her economic efforts to weaving and selling hand-woven textiles over the last 50 years (Figure 2). She has worked intermittently for boutiques, demonstrating backstrap weaving, sometimes on commission and sometimes for minimum wage. For a short period of time she opened her own small textile handicraft store in partnership with a seamstress before it failed. More often she has been an ambulatory vendor, selling in the parque. It was after observing Oralia's relative success and her inability to serve all her potential customers that Juana entered the street food business too.

Juana has had some success for the same four reasons that Oralia has, though on a much-reduced scale. She is not dedicated to just food selling as are Oralia, Bertilia, and other street food vendors, because she continues to sell handicrafts to tourists. Selling food, however, has allowed her to diversify her economic base and to not just rely on textile sales. She spends her mornings weaving in San Antonio Aguas Calientes, pausing to cook a meal of the day that she will sell in the Central Plaza. Her morning backstrap weaving may go into an inexpensive woven item for tourists or a much more expensive item of clothing, like a *po't* (blouse), *su't*, or *pa's* (belt) that a local Maya woman will purchase. To reduce her risk, since these are expensive to make, she often waits until a wealthy woman contracts her for a job. This pays less than funding her own weaving, but the pay is more reliable, since items she weaves on her own accord may sit unsold for months. When she has cooked the lunches she sells in Antigua, she catches a bus or sometimes one of the pickup trucks that haul goods and produce from Antigua to San Antonio.





**Figure 2**

Customers buying meals from a street food vendor under the portal on the Central Plaza

Typically, she sells under the portal, the business side of the plaza that is protected from rain. She does not have many customers, mainly, the poorest Maya ambulatory vendors and, surprisingly, a few other non-Maya Ladinos who work around the plaza. On one day, I observed a bank employee and one of the women who sells newspapers buying lunch from her. Her small inventory of meals, 10 to 15, can sell out in 15 or 20 minutes, which means she can clear about Q100 after expenses. This is better than the minimum wage of Q11.27 per hour. Once her food is sold out, she attempts to sell her textiles. Over the last five years, her food sales have provided more economic stability than her weaving, in that five days to six days a week she has a reliable income. Her commission-based morning weaving and afternoon textile sales, however, can result in larger, but inconsistent, financial gains.

One afternoon when we were talking, she said that she should have started selling food a lot longer ago. When I asked if she was worried about the strong enforcement of street vending regulations or if the arrests of street food vendors made her nervous, she bluntly replied in Kaqchikel, “Why? The food is sold in minutes and it’s not much, like my textiles. I don’t think they [the police] pay attention to me. If they take my food or my textiles, I won’t lose much, just the day.” She also is a charismatic charmer with the tourists and the shop owners, who would be outraged at the police confiscating her food and textiles.



**Figure 3**

Street food vendors selling meals to the Iglesia de Carmen handicraft vendors

In contrast to Oralia and Juana, Bertilia and her family decided to scale up and become even more mobile. Investing in a pickup truck, they effectively have a food truck (Figure 3). The bed of the pickup truck is filled with baskets and coolers with food and drinks and disposable plates and plasticware. They post a crudely written daily menu behind the cab and, then drive to the various places ambulatory vendors concentrate, but they make their base of operations the Carmen Marketplace (described above). Bertilia does not emphasize her Maya identity, as identity matters less than mobility for avoiding regulations. The pickup truck allows her to transport and serve a far larger number of customers and, as long as the truck is parked legally, the police have not interrupted or fined their business. In fact, police officers who are stationed near the Carmen Marketplace will eat lunches that Bertila prepares, since the local restaurants serve meals that are, at least, ten times more expensive and the municipal market comedores are too far away.

While her indigenous identity, with respect to her business, does not matter as much as it does for Oralia and Juana, because she is not selling in a manner or in a place in which foreign tourists are a large presence, she similarly provides inexpensive meals to vendors and workers who cannot afford to eat in the restaurants. As she has grown her base of loyal customers, she has gained a reputation for providing wholesome meals, rather than being recognized as a particularly talented cook. The dishes she serves, said one handicraft vendor, “are always enough to fill your stomach.” Others like the variety of food that they can choose from on a daily basis but emphasize that, “it isn’t gourmet, but it is healthy.”

### **Subjectivities of Street Food Sales and Consumption in Antigua**

It is beyond the scope of this article to detail all the meanings of and attitudes about street food in Antigua from the range of subjective vantage points of all who connected with street food: the food vendors themselves, the handicraft vendors who constitute their primary

clients, tourists who only by chance encounter them when purchasing handicrafts, and various city officials who are responsible for regulating the streets. However, health, safety, and tradition emerge as the common dominant themes in conversations with these various actors, as the above sections illustrate. Whether these factors—health, safety, and tradition—are seen as positive or negative depends on the person, their experience, and the context in which the street food is located.

Just where street vendors fit into urban setting is complicated and food vendors, in particular, can find themselves struggling to stay in business, because of aggressive removal by the police. Like Maya handicraft vendors, the street food vendors commonly argue that they are beneficial, providing an important service to Antigua, add interesting character to the city, and can help make the city safer because they watch out for criminals. The vendors' attitudes are similar to other researchers' observations that similarly low-skilled people could become thieves, yet, do not when able to engage in street vending (Boels, 2014). Other scholars (Abdulkarim, Nassar, 2014) have argued that street vendors make urban plazas better places for aesthetic and economic reasons. The municipal and tourism police find these claims dubious, a position that Bromley (2000) explains is common throughout the world.

While it would be difficult to find any street vendor who admits to being a negative influence on Antigua, this kind of positive positioning has largely proven unsuccessful with government officials and police in Antigua (Little, 2008; 2015). This is why Oralia's, Juana's, and Bertilia's approaches to their respective food businesses are distinctive and contribute to their relative success and safety from removal and fines. Their approach is to not look for random national and international tourist customers. They do not view their ventures into street sales as a way to pick up extra money at random times. They serve their street food to reliable customers at regular times, where other street food vendors may spend hours walking the streets. Furthermore, and to which I have not given sufficient attention, they each cook what could be considered the most traditional of Guatemalan foods, like the pepian described above. Where there are few tourism-oriented restaurants that proudly serve Guatemalan cuisine, these street food vendors, and others not discussed here, are also successful, limit the food that they sell to what can be considered traditional, homemade dishes. Some of their customers have even told me, "Bertilia's *hilachas* (shredded beef, potatoes, carrots, and green beans in a tomato and pepper stew) remind me of what my mother [or wife] makes. Terrible!" Despite the critique, they return to eat what reminds them of home and, significantly, this taste of home is brought to them by women, as home-cooked meals are made by women. Of course, there are customers who eat these women's food because it tastes good, while being familiar and distinctively Guatemalan.

The affordability and flavor of their food, a stable clientele base, and the ways in which they strategically use their indigeneity help inscribe them into Antigua's everyday life in ways that effectively grant them a security and demonstrates urban spatial permissiveness in action. They

may be technically illegal according to municipal regulations, but they are permitted to sell. Where lack of status as basis of exclusion and justification to not grant rights to be in and work in a place, especially, for street vendors (Swider, 2014), vendors such as Oralia, Juana, and Bertilia have identified a niche that allows them rights to the city. These rights are based on sets of practices, described in the previous section, that are based in respect and reciprocity and figure into the four factors that help them stay in business and out of trouble with the authorities.

## Conclusions

The food vendors' successes are related to the strategies they employ by drawing on their gendered, indigenous, and class identities, and in the ways that they work against and with the local perceptions of food that they sell. I have outlined how their work and food contrasts with that of other street vendors and address the tensions that exist between the health/danger discourses and the illegal, yet necessary, economic role these vendors play to make a living themselves and feed a large segment of Antigua's workers.

It would be an overstretch to claim street food vendors, as they perform their everyday work of selling and serving food are any kind of organized resistance movement, as Mendiola García (2017) and Cross (1998; 2000) have argued for urban food vendors in Mexico. Cross argues that the growth of informal sector happens, precisely, because street vendors both resist (Cross, 1998), and successfully evade control by the state (Cross, 2000). Case studies such as those by Mendiola García and Cross affirm Lefebvre's (1996) and Harvey's (2012) respective positions that workers can seize "the places of possibility" and transform them through overtly political actions to claim their right to the city. Typically, in such instances, Bromely (2000: 23) argues that the result of a "complex mix of persecution, tolerance, regulation and promotion is usually 'containment.' Street vendors are kept out of elite and private areas, and their numbers are limited in the 'conflict-zones' of maximum congestion." By contrast, in this case study, successful, long-term street food vendors do their business in the heart of elite, highly regulated areas. However, the claiming of space and rights to the city can happen through everyday practices of working and selling in public places, like streets and plazas, as I have demonstrated here.

The everyday practice by the street food vendors in contrast to Antigua's regulations succeeds not because of collective organizing to claim their rights but, rather, because of the small ways that they provide a needed service, cultivate local clientele, and strategically use their gender, social, and cultural identities to ingratiate themselves with authorities, local businesses, and tourists. By conducting a business that is built, fundamentally, on reciprocity between the food vendors and workers and police officers, extreme draconian measures by government officials and police to stem street food vending, especially, in a place like Antigua, ultimately fail. Since most restaurants are too expensive for most

workers, contributing to the economic and social marginalization of a large number of workers in search of affordable, quick meals. Further confounding city officials' abilities to curtail street food sales is the tendency of many centrally located restaurants being inhospitable to most Mayas and poor Guatemalan's irrespective of their ethnicity.

So, rather than organized resistance to city orders and regulations, the street food vendors are able to see the gaps between regulations, enforcement, and needs of their consumers that allow them into the most controlled parts of the city. Although the vendors describe themselves, their work, and roles in functionalist terms, staying in business is far more complex, since they must navigate a complex terrain of client demands, city regulations mediated through police officers and food inspectors, and multi-layered reciprocal relations that complicate simply serving customers food they want to eat. As the food vendors conduct business and work to improve their economic position, they occupy the flexible in-between space of "extralegality" (Smart, Zerilli, 2014) that is ambiguously gray, illustrating how forms of legal and spatial permissiveness (Little, 2014) result in the reciprocal, flexible, and mobile socio-economic practices of street economies.

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## Notes

- [1] See, "Reglamento Municipal Que Prohibe El Uso De La Via Publica Para La Exhibición, Alquiler, Venta Y Comercialización De Bienes Y Servicios En El Municipio De La Antigua Guatemala", which is the code manual for the city that was published during the administration of Mayor César Antonio Siliezar Portillo (2004-2008). The codes themselves were approved by the city council in 1995.
- [2] Retrieved from <http://muniantigua.gob.gt/2017/02/artista-entrega-reconocimiento-municipalidad-la-antigua-guatemala/>
- [3] Retrieved from <http://muniantigua.gob.gt/reglamentos-municipales/>
- [4] Reglamento Municipal Que Prohibe El Uso De La Via Publica Para La Exhibición, Alquiler, Venta Y Comercialización De Bienes Y Servicios En El Municipio De La Antigua Guatemala. (Acuerdo 02-01-2007) and Reforma Al Reglamento Municipal Que Prohibe El Uso De La Vía Pública Para La Exhibición, Alquiler, Venta Y Comercialización De Bienes Y Servicios En El Municipio De La Antigua Guatemala, (Acta 51-2014 Punto Sexto).
- [5] Acuerdo Gubernativos No. 242-2018, *Diario de Centroamérica* el 28 de diciembre de 2018.