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Struggles, Urban Citizenship, And Belonging: The Experience Of Undocumented Street Vendors And Food Truck Owners In Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT: The study examines the experience of Latina women selling food on the streets of Los Angeles. There has been a long history of food vending since the immigration wave from Latin America to Los Angeles during the 1980s. The majority of the immigrant women who sell food are poor, without legal rights to stay in the United States, and in many instances single with children. However, the immigrant women are subject to much harassment from city officials and the police as they are forced to sell without permits, since permits are highly unaffordable and the process bureaucratic. The study examines how the women continue to work under these difficult conditions. The study also explores how the women situate themselves and the connections they make with the larger community while they sell on the street. Much of the research on Latina immigrants and informal work has been in the area of domestic work and day labor work. In examining the experience of women street vendors, the research will contribute to scholarship on undocumented immigrants, urban citizenship, and

immigrants and work. Data are drawn on interviews and participation observation of women selling food in three neighborhoods in Los Angeles.

It is nine in the morning in the commercial district of MacArthur Park area, a predominantly Central American neighborhood. The shops, restaurants, and various clinics in the area have just opened. Outside a 99-cent discount store which stands on the corner of two major streets, I see a woman talking on her cell phone. I recognize this woman immediately since I had bought several *pan dulces* from her as early as seven in the morning. At that hour, the sidewalk was lined with at least a dozen women selling traditional Central American and Mexican food items such as *pupsas* and *tamales* as well as international phone cards and soft drinks. I approached her and said to her that I would like to buy some sweet bread. She went into the 99-cent store and walked to the rear end of this rather large chain store. I noticed that she had stacked two crates of *pan dulces* on the floor. My curiosity did not contain me. I asked her, "How is it that the manager allows you to store the *pan dulces* in his store?" "Well, I help here," she told me. "I sweep the portion of the sidewalk in front of the store and I run small errands for them. My grandmother always told me when you don't have money always offer to wash dishes for somebody. There are a lot of people who are lazy and don't wish to do certain jobs." I then asked her about the whereabouts of the other street vendors. "They left early because the police have been around. That is why I put my things inside the store. I could not afford to leave early."

In South Central Los Angeles, a house is in flames. It is burnt to the ground. Fortunately, the lives of the family as well as the livelihood of the family, a *lonchera* (a food truck) are safe. The family who own the *lonchera* have sold home-cooked *carnitas*, *tacos*, and pork skins for over two decades,

and they have earned a reputation for selling the best *carnitas* in Los Angeles. The family moved into the oldest daughter's house, but the *lonchera* stayed parked at a neighbor's house. The neighbor also agreed to let them do some of the cooking in his backyard. On the weekend, following the fire that caused the family to lose almost everything they owned, business continued as usual. Maria sat on a chair greeting familiar passersby and customers. The oldest daughter, Carolina, who worked as a pre-school teacher during the week, was as usual helping her mother serve the customers. What was different was that in front of the *lonchera* leaflets were posted advertising a car wash: This was a means to raise funds for the family. Carolina explained to me that her cousins had organized a car wash to raise money for the items lost in the fire. Another leaflet advertised a website which a friend of Carolina had created to raise money for the family. This leaflet explained briefly why the family deserved help, one of the reasons being that Maria had always helped the homeless by giving them free *tacos* and *carnitas*.

These are the collective narratives of women food street vendors who struggle, claim, and form part of the urbanscape in Los Angeles. This essay examines, through audio-recorded interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, the struggles, agency, and expressions of urban immersion of immigrant street vendors in Los Angeles. In doing so, the study demonstrates that women street vendors, although unrecognized by the city and persistently criminalized, nevertheless gain a sense of citizenship and belonging through their varied experiences and struggles. In this sense, the idea of citizenship is defined and understood broadly: it includes women's sense of collectivism, their ability to negotiate the systems, their knowledges of the cityscapes, and their relationship to the community and their clients.

Street Vending and Agency

Several scholars have offered an analysis of street vending in the global South as well as in the United States from various perspectives. Portes et al. (1989) define street vending activities along with other informal income-generating activities by underscoring that the informal sector is comprised of economic activity that uses illegal means to produce legal products. Street vending is regarded as a significant subset of the informal economy activity, understood mainly as a form of survival strategy by poor immigrants who do not have much education and other basic skills which would enable them to find work in the formal sector (Moser 1994). A relatively recent approach offers an additional perspective that claims that people operating within the informal economy are refusing to be constrained by structural forces, are displaying their agency, and as political actors are resisting varying obstacles and obstructions in their lives (Cross 1998; Wilson 2005; Musoni 2010; Zlolniski 2006). Cross, in his analysis of the relationship between street vendors and the state in Mexico city, demonstrates the organizational activities of street vendors against harassment by the police including the use of force and threats of arrests, and the confiscation of their property by municipal officials. Francis Musoni (2010) documents the harrowing experience of street vendors in Zimbabwe when police fired teargas to disperse traders and burned down market stalls. In this study, Musoni illustrates that street vending activity in response to this state-mandated cleanup operation did not decrease. The vendors, even though they were not in a position to formally organize against the operation, were back within 48 hours. In *JANITORS, STREET VENDORS, AND ACTIVISTS*, Christian Zlolniski, (2006) illustrates through detailed case studies the ways in which street vendors in San Jose, California, are faced by structural opportunities and constraints on the one hand, and by personal and family circumstances

on the other, both of which lead many immigrants to choose informal economic activities. According to Zolniski (2006), informal income-generating activities are not necessarily isolated from formal sector wage earning, as many immigrants engage in both informal and formal economies.

Street vending has also received much scholarly attention as concerns its relationship to urban space. For example, in Central Accra, in Ghana, vendors adopt spatial strategies by relocating to places where they can avoid harassment from metropolitan authority figures (Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008). In some instances, street vendors may relocate for the sole reason of avoiding persecution from the police; in other cases, street vendors select to sell in safer and less crime-ridden specialized market spaces, even if it resulted in lower income levels. This was the case of Bogotá's street vendors (Donovan 2008). Other scholars have shown the relationship between street vending and spatial control. For example, Stacey Hunt (2009) highlights the significance of spatial control in Bogotá in the state's attempts to remove vendors from specific places, and thus create a site for "citizen participation." She suggests that by eliminating the rights of the vendors to sell, their rights to citizen participation is weakened. Thereby the vendors' status is not defined only by the absence of their right to mobility, but also by "the ascription of hypermobility to them" (Hunt 346: 2009).

In the current economic climate, with the disappearance of low-wage jobs within the formal sector, reliance on informal economy needs to be re-examined and understood in terms of the ways in which actors within the informal economy continue to form part of the cityscapes in which they operate. For example, in New York City on the Red Hook waterfront ball fields close to the Swedish furniture store IKEA, street food vendors flying national flags of Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala sell their goods to soccer players, their families, and New Yorker "foodies" (Zukin 2010). Sha-

ron Zukin (2010:161) understands both IKEA and the Latino vendors as representing forms of “global commerce.” She suggests that the Latino street vendors, although subject to arrests and harassment by the police, are at the same time treated and courted with respect by local developers and in turn by national states.

Similarly, Eileen Moyer (2004) demonstrates the processes of globalization and young street vendors’ lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She argues that vendors selling outside the Sheraton Hotel benefit from development, but at the same time remain at the margins of the city’s global spaces. While Moyer attends to the complexity of the effect of globalization on vending activities, Custinger (2000:72) explores the negative impact of globalization in Barbados, West Indies. She points out that in the context of the “new breed of discerning tourists” the government elites are quick to remove street vendors from cityspaces.

In Los Angeles, where street vending can be found across many areas, Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2011: 40) help explain street vending among children and teens by drawing on an intersectionalities approach, one that considers the intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender, and immigration. In exploring the question of how young Latina street vendors confront the stigma of doing low-status and highly visible work, they argue that these children rely on new moral constructions. These young children, the authors underscore, see themselves as hard working and diligent, and at the same time speak of enjoying their experience of working in the public sphere.

Scholarly approaches to street vending have thus focused on street vendors’ agency as they contest and claim varying cityscapes within the context of neoliberal globalization. It becomes important to consider the ways in which *undocumented* immigrant street vendors (particularly women) have historically and in present times claimed participatory legal rights

within global cities. A number of scholars have commented on the ways in which cities have become the contested territory upon which ethnic groups are compelled to define their identities and articulate citizenship rights and obligations (Baubock 2003; Isin 2000; Mushaben 2006; Rocco 1999; Varsanyi 2006). The undocumented women immigrants who sell food in the Mexican and Central American sections of Los Angeles must contest and defy specific city regulations with respect to selling food on the street, and they do so at the risk of deportation. Furthermore, in addition to bureaucratic regulations, they must contend with the Los Angeles police who can force street vendors to move. There is no denying that for the Los Angeles street vendors, the city becomes a contested territory. For example, in an automobile-dominated environment devoid of much street life, the Latina street vendors and the food trucks lend vibrancy to the quiet parks, street corners, and strip malls, such that people stop to eat, chat, and line up as they wait for their favorite *taco* or *tamale* or *raspada*. In such a context, it is the city rather than the nation-state which becomes a site for expression of rights-claims and belonging.

As the women defy, negotiate, and contest city regulations, they simultaneously exhibit a sense of belonging and identification with the city of Los Angeles. Yuval-Davis and Werbner (1999) critique political science definitions as being limited to the relationship between an individual and state and define citizenship as a more total relationship inflected by identity and a sense of belonging. Anthropologist Gálvez (2010: 20) conceptualizes citizenship as an understanding of the ways that individuals negotiate their belonging and, by extension, their rights and responsibilities in a polity; a process that articulates personhood while also producing collectivities. In the context of claiming rights, while selling food on the street, this idea of collectivity becomes most explicit as the vendors come together to defend their spaces and their right to sell food. Flores (2003) argues that citizens do not only seek

to gain full membership in a society but also struggle to forge community, claim space, and reshape it. These acts could not be truer for Latina women who reshape the Los Angeles metropolis while contesting the city authorities and bureaucracies, which could potentially force them into further poverty because of stringent and expensive rules and regulations.

Methodology

I interviewed 20 women street vendors in three areas in Los Angeles. These included South Central Los Angeles, North East Los Angeles, and the Westlake/MacArthur Park area. The research was carried out in two phases, once in the summer and once in the winter, over a period of six weeks. The majority of the women I spoke with sold food items from grocery shopping carts. These included *tamales*, *raspadas*, hot dogs, fried pork rinds, *elotes*, *champurradas*, *arroz con leche*, fresh orange juice with or without raw eggs, sliced fresh fruits, and *pan dulces*. Additionally, I interviewed four women who managed family-run *loncheras* in South Central Los Angeles and one woman who operated a general store out of her Chevy van, which she parked outside a privately run Catholic school. Although both men and women sell food in several neighborhoods in Los Angeles, women were always much more vulnerable and at the same time more active in asserting their presence on the streets in Los Angeles. Thus I decided to focus my attention on women. As has been noted in scholarship about women workers in the informal economy, because of societal, cultural, and familial constraints, they are highly disadvantaged and very vulnerable (Cartya 1987; Lycette and White 1988; Rakowski 1987; Safa 1995; Wilson 1998).

I selected these three sections of Los Angeles because they were neighborhoods in which significant numbers of Mexican and Central American immigrants lived. I chose several dif-

ferent sites to interview women. In North East Los Angeles, I interviewed and did participant observation at a recreational park where the women street vendors parked their carts and whose primary customers were children who treated themselves to *raspadas* and hot dogs following a swim. In South Los Angeles, I observed and interviewed women in a variety of places such as bus stops, mini malls, side streets, outside schools, and in their own homes. Three of the women I met with invited me to do the interviews in their houses. In South Central Los Angeles, I was also assisted by a 25-year old woman who had grown up in this area. Montserrat Hernández helped me in forming initial contacts with the women I interviewed as well as in conducting some interviews as she was completely bilingual. She worked as a preschool teacher at a daycare center for toddlers, but during the summer in which I did part of my research she was on furlough, since the state of California did not have the budget to pay its many employees in that time period.

In the summer time, over a period of four weeks, I focused on doing interviews in South Central Los Angeles and North East Los Angeles. In the winter I focused on conducting interviews and participant observation in the MacArthur Park area for two weeks.

My semistructured interview questions were guided by topics such as reasons for food street vending, obstacles and challenges of street vending, how these challenges were met, and future plans. During my observations, I paid attention to the ways in which the women who formed part of this study made connections and articulated notions of belonging within the spaces from which they sold.

Before I began the interviews, I sought consent from the women and explained the purpose of the project. I introduced myself as a university professor who lived in England, but was back in Los Angeles to visit family and friends and conduct research. I outlined the purpose of my research. I also explained

to the vendors that part of my job was to write articles regularly. I also told them that I had grown up in Pakistan since in my experience most people were interested in my origins. One of the women asked me if women in Pakistan were allowed to work outside the home. She said that she had seen on the Discovery channel that women were abused by men if they tried to work. I quickly countered this stereotypical depiction of Pakistani women. The majority of the women I approached were more than willing to speak to me after I explained in detail the purpose of my study, which was to understand some of the experiences of women street vendors in Los Angeles. In one instance, when I told one of the women that I hoped to get my article published in a journal, she encouraged me to write for the Los Angeles Spanish publication HOY which was found in newsstands in many Latino dominated sections of the city. In another instance, I knew that I had won an interviewee's trust when she asked me to watch her cart while she went on her break. However, during those 15 minutes, I did not manage to sell a single *tamale*. Following an interview, I always bought some food item from the vendor and ate it on the street as it allowed me to further my participant observation. I was always offered a seat on the milk crates which the women themselves used to sit on. I found eating and drinking street food and beverages in Los Angeles a rather enjoyable way to do fieldwork.

There were some challenges involved in conducting interviews in an anti-immigrant political climate. Some of the women I approached did look at me with suspicion and did not wish to speak to me. However, I did not take these rejections personally since I knew it was in the women's best interest to be wary at times. In such cases, I simply bought something and moved onto the next street food vendor.

In addition to conducting interviews of the women street vendors, I also interviewed two staff members of two non-profit organizations: the Coalition for Humane Immigrant

Rights for Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and Mama's Hot Tamales. Both have helped support street vendors' rights over the years. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into the level of support that the women received from non-profit organizations. I also interviewed a woman at a commissary which sold and stored food trucks and vending carts.

Finally, in order to provide an historical context of the ways in which women street vendors claimed and struggled for their rights in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I did some archival research at the Southern California Library for Social Sciences and Research located in South Central Los Angeles. Kathleen Coll (2010) in *REMAKING CITIZENSHIP* points out that in order to comprehend contemporary immigrant claims for citizenship and belonging, one must examine grassroots activism over many years. With this in mind, I decided to include the narratives of street vendor activists from this particular period.

Street Vending in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s

Informal street food vending in Los Angeles is by no means a recent phenomenon. It began in the mid-1980s. In a *LOS ANGELES TIMES* editorial, the executive director of the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) and the coordinator of the street vending legalization campaign for CHIRLA point out that it started with the immigration of people into the U.S. from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Latino immigrants in many instances brought with them traditions of vending from their countries of origin (Janis and Weber 1991). From that decade on, there was an increase in vending. Some of the reasons were the economic recession of 1982 in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America as well as the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which penalized employers for hiring undocumented workers. At

the time, street vending was considered a misdemeanor in Los Angeles, and street vendors could be fined up to \$1000 and put in jail for 180 days. As a consequence, poor men and women selling on the streets were vulnerable to police action: they were constantly harassed, ticketed, arrested. Women who earned as little as \$20 a day were sometimes imprisoned for their street vending activities.

Police harassment and arrests of women street vendors at that time were documented. Some of the braver women street vendors provided testimonials to the public about their negative experiences with the police. In a publication called *PROBE*, put forth by the National Assembly of Religious Women from Chicago, Illinois, narratives of the daily survival struggle of women street vendors were made public. I include excerpts below.

On Saturday, September 19, 1986 at 9:45 a.m., Diana was arrested by two uniformed police officers for vending on the street without a license. When the police came close to where she was working, Diana quickly gathered her things and began to run. A male police officer stopped her by punching her in the chest, knocking her off her feet. Then the officer and his female partner both struck her. There were many witnesses who were yelling at the police. The female officer put handcuffs on Diana's wrists behind her back, yanking Diana's arms upwards, causing sharp pain in her left arm and shoulders (Arnold and Brinnon 1987).

The second time Sylvia was arrested was 1:00 pm on a Sunday. The police took all her money, \$160, and confiscated her goods. She remained in jail until 2:00 a.m. Monday, until her son was able to raise \$100 bail. During these thirteen hours she was given only one watered down cup of coffee and two pieces of bread. She was called a "shit" because she does not speak English. She said she was not beaten herself, but added that "most are." The \$160 has never been returned to her (Arnold and Brinnon 1987).

Thus, the conditions of these street vendors did receive considerable attention in the public sphere. The Metro section of the LOS ANGELES TIMES ran several articles and columns concerning the conditions of street vendors. The newspaper reported 238 street sales convictions from January to August 1987 with 76 people serving time in jail. Local groups and individual activists lent their support to defend the rights of street vendors in Los Angeles. A group called Southern California Ecumenical Council's Interfaith Task Force on Central America established a small defense fund to help vendors pay fines and meet bail when arrested. The Working People's Law Center also attempted to challenge the city's ban on pedestrian street sales, contending that it discriminates against the poor. Olivia Olea, a Mexican woman who grew up in East Los Angeles, produced a documentary called POR LA VIDA, subtitled "Street Vending and the Criminalization of Latinos" bringing attention to the fact that Los Angeles was the only major U.S. city where it was considered a crime. The film also lent visibility to the street vendors in the city. In addition to a video documentary, a play titled WHERE THE GODS WALK was also produced featuring a bilingual cast that included real vendors. In this play, the vendors are so beset with rules and regulations that they turn into robots (Beyette 1990)

On August 1, 1993 the LOS ANGELES TIMES (Lopez 1993) reported that over a 100 street vendors packed a city council committee meeting asking that council members set a date for a hearing on a proposed ordinance that would legalize street vending. The vendors, many of them women carrying their children, picketed outside City Hall before flooding the committee room. Several of the street vendors were noted to carry signs with such slogans as "*Queremos pagar taxes*" (We want to pay taxes) and "Police Work with us, not against us." The spokeswoman for the 500 member Association of Street Vendors argued that the ordinance was important because it took

care of everybody's needs including businesses, vendors and, residents.

Following a six year battle, on January 4, 1994 the City Council approved a pilot program to permit vending in eight districts. This program was to be established through a permit procedure that required approval from residents and merchants in the commercial areas where the vendors wanted to work. The ordinance stated that the council was to adopt a humane and comprehensive enforcement policy. Several hundred vendors packed City Hall to watch council members to approve the vending ordinance. Entrepreneurs willing to spend up to \$5000 for the car, insurance, permits, and a uniform could then sell from a designated space. There were celebrations once the ordinance passed. However, the celebrations did not last for very long and six months later the LOS ANGELES TIMES (Lopez 1994) ran the headlines "Vendors Protest Against LAPD" (Los Angeles Police Department). At this moment in time, no vending license had been issued, and the vendors were months away from establishing themselves in the eight districts that were approved by the council as part of two year pilot program. Moreover, any proposed district could be easily removed by the signatures of 10% of the business owners or residents in the area. Six months following the passage of the ordinance and within a span of only a few weeks eight women were arrested and 839 ticketed by the Rampart police division. However, these racist treatments of Latina women striving to make ends meet did not go by unchallenged. More than 30 street vendors, mostly women, protested outside in front of the police station, many shouting "Police, we want to be your friends." Others waved signs stating, "*Somos vendedores, no criminales,*" or "We are vendors, not criminals."

Thus, in this manner, women street vendors Los Angeles through their varying struggles have played a significant role in the urban public sphere in Los Angeles. They not only

transformed the barren Los Angeles streets, devoid of public space and life (see Mike Davis 2000). But they also contested and challenged for their legal rights in the city. It is such articulations of claims, rights, and belonging which can be understood as expressions of urban citizenship. The city of Los Angeles may not directly control immigrants' formal citizenship rights, but it does have the power to amend laws so that the people who live there can participate with relative ease in the life of the city.

The Challenges of Food Vending on the Streets in the Current Context

The hardships that many women street vendors as well as food truck owners encounter today remain in effect, but are also compounded by the fact that many of these micro-entrepreneurs are undocumented, that the country continues to face a deep economic recession, and that the state of California been unable to balance its budget for several years. Moreover, in recent years, there has been growing public resentment toward undocumented immigrants. During George W. Bush's administration, work places experienced raids in which people with authorized documents were subject to deportations. Today, during Obama's administration undocumented workers can be fired on the spot. Very recently, the factory for Los Angeles based international clothing chain American Apparel fired 2000 of their employees. More significantly, because the Homeland Security has increasingly encroached into local enforcement, there are now various ways that immigration agents can find out about the immigration status of an individual. According to a policy advocate at CHIRLA street vendors (especially who lack licenses) are at high risk of deportation. "If the police gets into their head to arrest them, then immigration agents may have access to them. Thus street

vendors are taking very high risks by selling unlawfully," he told me when I interviewed him. His words rang true when in February, 2011, a women ice cream vendor, while pushing her cart in a section of Los Angeles, was cited for coming too close to a school, which resulted in her arrest: she now faces deportation (Tokumatsu 2011). Thus, in several ways undocumented women selling food on the streets have become more vulnerable than they were in earlier decades.

Among many other challenges, the street vendors now encounter increased competition. Given the prolonged economic downturn, there is likely to be an increase in various sub-sectors of the informal economy. Street vending is one such example. In several neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, street vending of foodstuffs has increased and has even come to become popular in the mainstream population. Los Angeles food lovers now follow gourmet *loncheras* on twitter, pay less than restaurant prices, and acquire the experience of eating ethnically diverse foods such as sushi, Korean *poolgoki*, fusion tacos, and Indian *dosas*, on the streets in areas such as downtown Los Angeles, Silver Lake, and Echo Park. Driving around the city, one can now see people lining up at all times of day and night waiting patiently for their meals. However, there are notable differences in the food street vending business and there is a hierarchy among street food vendors. At the top of the ladder are what have been come to be known as gourmet food trucks, which are fully licensed and have full rights to operate in designated areas of the city. In the middle somewhere are the traditional *loncheras*, run and managed by Latino immigrant families who are usually licensed, but may struggle financially to keep up with the city's ever changing regulations with regard to certain specifications. At the bottom of the ladder, with the least rights to city spaces, are the food street vendors who sell from their make shift shopping carts. They are also considered among the poorest in terms of social class (see Zlolniski 2006), although it seems that there may be a

growing acceptance of their presence as well in the mainstream. For example, on January, 2011 while many vendors were selling *tamales*, *elotes*, and *chumpurradas* to people who were lined up waiting to see the infamous New Year's Pasadena parade, the police came around and ticketed the vendors. However, what was significant was that the people enjoying hot drinks and foods in near freezing temperatures booed at the police, which showed the acceptance and recognition of their presence in an affluent section of Los Angeles. But this is not a typical story of the everyday realities of the street vendors: in the majority of instances their work remains invisible in the mainstream and they continue to encounter city ordinances that make it difficult to work free from harassment from city health officials and the police.

A visit to the commissary located in South Central Los Angeles revealed the level of bureaucracy and expenses that street vendors could potentially face. For example, a fruit cart costs as much as \$2000 and has to pass health inspection. Additionally, the carts needed to be stored at the commissary, which would charge the fruit vendors \$150.00 monthly rent for the storage facilities they provided. The fruit had to be sold in a container and had to be packaged. The fruit also had to be sliced in the kitchen provided by the commissary. It was even more difficult to sell tamales in any "legal" fashion. Just like the fruit cart, there existed a legal "tamale cart" with specifications formulated by the city. The tamale cart cost about \$4650. However, the health department would only give a permit if the vendors were connected to a restaurant. They needed to get a letter from the restaurant owner stating that the vendor had prepared the tamales on the premises. The tamale cart also needed to be stored at the commissary. In addition, a vendor also needed a valid California identification card in order to obtain these documents, letters, and permits. These city requirements were simply impossible to fulfil for poor

undocumented immigrant women with limited resources, who were selling in poor sections of the city.

In order to help improve the conditions of women selling tamales, one well-intentioned non-profit and for-profit restaurant called *Mama's Hot Tamales* was set up by the Vital Economic Neighborhood Development (a program of the non-profit Institute for Urban Research and Development) with the aim to revitalize the MacArthur Park area. The aim of the restaurant was to help aid women selling tamales on the street to comply with state and local regulations, as well as to pay taxes on their sales. However, this non-profit venture soon lost its funding in this specific area. Sandra Romero-Plasencia, the director and owner of *Mama's Hot Tamales* told me:

the restaurant and cafe are doing well and we have many customers. The non-profit side of the operation is also doing well and we are in a position to support women with some resources. But it is difficult to support women who sell from their grocery carts as there is no funding in the area. At the moment, the official tamale carts which cost about \$7,000 are in storage. It was a difficult venture, because women did not wish to be restricted selling in the crime ridden park as it was dangerous and they wanted to be more mobile. Moreover, when we receive federal funding, it is problematic because I have to fill out a lot of forms and have to declare the immigrant status of the women in training.

Thus, there remains very little support and protection for street vendors as well as food truck owners. A significant number of the street vendors are women. Despite the lack of support coupled with risks of deportations (of which they are well aware of) the women continue to serve the communities they reside in, taking as little as between \$20 to \$50 home. These earnings help support their children and pay their rent. The following paragraphs will illustrate the ways in which women in this type of food entrepreneurship continue to resist

and survive the city health inspectors' checks, and the police harassments, despite the many barriers to sell food in their local communities.

Forging Community at MacArthur Park/Westlake Area

This section of the city since the 1980s has attracted a diverse Latina population including Mexicans, Central Americans, Cubans, and South Americans (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). This neighbourhood, although rich in terms of cultural diversity, is economically one of the most disenfranchised sections of the city. Immigrant families often double up with two families sharing a two-bedroom apartment and pooling funds for rent, food, and utilities (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). Similar to many other economically depressed parts of the city, this vicinity has witnessed high levels of gang activity. Today, the Westlake/MacArthur Park-scape, like as many sections of Los Angeles, is slowly becoming gentrified. This offers few solutions to the problems of the poor, since they are then forced to relocate because they can no longer afford higher cost of living which comes at the expense of gentrification.

Street vending takes place between six and ten in the morning in the commercial streets around MacArthur Park in the Westlake area. Women of Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Mexican origin, several of them who are undocumented, sell a variety of foods such as *tamales*, *pupusas*, and *pan dulces*, and beverages such as *arroz con leche*, *champurradas*, and fresh orange juice with or without raw eggs. The prices for these items are fixed. The tamales sell for a \$1, *pupusas* for \$1.50, hot beverages for \$1.50 and orange juice for \$2.50. The weekends are busier and women sell larger meals such as *menudo*, *pipian*, and various kinds of *tacos*. These items sell from \$2

to \$4.00. The women told me that on a good day they made about \$50.

The street vendors create a lively and cheerful atmosphere as many of them call out: "tamales tamales" to passersby. On the days it rains, the women protect themselves with large umbrellas. The sidewalks become even livelier on such days with many men and women selling colorful umbrellas beside the food vendors. As Mike Davis correctly points out, in Los Angeles, Latinos have been instrumental in making dead urban spaces look vibrant in numerous ways. He notes: "The most intense and creative convergence of Ibero-Mediterranean and Meso American cultures is precisely their shared conviction that civilized sociality is constituted in the daily intercourse of the *plaza* and *mercado*" (Davis 2000, p.55). But what is especially significant in this context is that Latina women not only reshape the public sphere but that they also claim and assert their presence on the streets through their entrepreneurial efforts in a climate which has become increasingly hostile towards immigrants. Furthermore, they display spatial strategy not only by selecting spots which they consider to be most lucrative for their vending activities, but by also strategically and collectively deciding to sell in the early hours of the morning—the time of day when they would be least likely to be harassed by the police and the city.

The vendors sell from the same spot each day of the week. When I asked them how they decided to select their specific spots they offered varied explanations. Some of the women said that it was merely by observing the number of people that passed by that they decided on the selection of a particular spot, while others told me that other vendors had referred them to the particular spots. Some of them said that they had tried different areas and did not sell very much, thus leading them to change locations. During weekends and on some of the rainy days, when competition intensified, I observed them simply share their spots with each other. In this

manner, they developed regular customers and forged links with other women street vendors who sold close by. At times, they requested another vendor to look after their carts while they went on their breaks. In other instances they bought food from each other. On a few occasions, I observed a woman from Oaxaca, Mexico who sold *pan dulces* buy *pupusas* from the Salvadoran woman. In this manner, the street vendors forged a pan-ethnic Latino community west of downtown Los Angeles. Their common language, their daily struggles, and their commitment to supporting themselves and their families through selling in the early hours of the morning helped bring Guatemalans, Salvadorians, Southern and Northern Mexicans together on the three blocks composing in this very well known and prominent part of Latina Los Angeles. Collectively, they came to understand that the city inspectors and the police were the main obstacles to their success. Almost all of the women I interviewed told me that they have to leave the premises at a specific time because the police start to frequent the area between 9 and 10 in the morning and issue fines or in some extreme cases take the vendors' money from them. On one occasion, when I did not see one street vendor in her regular spot, I was offered the explanation, "she is not here today because the police fined her and also took her money and then they went to MacDonal'd's to eat." Thus the Salvadoran woman, although a competitor, not only showed her sympathy with the street vendor, but also positioned the police in a negative light-as robbers using somebody's hard earned money to entertain themselves at MacDonal'd's. A customer overhearing the story sympathized saying "poor woman...she was only making a living." This is especially noteworthy, because street vending business criminalized by the police was seen as a legitimate activity by the customer, since he expressed his sympathies with the woman who was fined by the police.

The level of success that the women experienced in their business was by no means uniform. During the post Christmas period, almost all of the vendors told me that their business was slower than usual. However, Dalia, who cooked fresh *pupusas* on the spot clearly monopolized the early morning street vending scene. Like all the other street vendors, she sold from a grocery cart, but had a gas stove on top of a wooden plank balanced on the cart. On top of this portable gas stove, she had a long pan which she used to cook the *pupusas*. The different ingredients needed for the three different types of *pupusas* which she sold, such as flour, cheese, beans, and pork, were all contained in plastic containers, neatly arranged in the grocery cart. There was a large plastic bag tied to one end of the shopping cart so that customers who ate on the spot could throw their paper plates in the bag. Another plastic bag which contained paper napkins was tied to the other end of the cart. The sight of a Salvadoran woman making fresh *pupusas* drew a number of customers. In this manner, Dalia earned much more than some of the other street vendors, who seemed to have had to wait for much longer periods before they got any customers. Dalia also demonstrated her rights to space, not only through the act of selling *pupusas*, but also by maintaining an outdoor kitchen in an urban setting.

The women's claims to rights to their respective spaces were illustrated in the ways they talked about cleanliness in their vendor spots. The women were very conscious about leaving the sidewalk clean. Several of the women street vendors I spoke with told me that the staff of the stores they sold in front of, including a large 99-cent store, a 24-hour donut shop, a Salvadoran fast food restaurant, and a liquor store, all agreed to allow the women to sell close to their entrances as long as they left the side walk clean. Many of these women mentioned to me that they had actively sought permission from the largely Latino businesses in the area. However, since many of the restaurants and stores did not open before nine,

I assumed that the local business owners did not consider them as a threat. However, one exception was a 24-hour donut store. The women who sold outside the mini-mall strip which housed the 24-hour donut shop told me that the staff did not mind their presence as long as they left the sidewalks clean. I assumed that Liliana must have had to actively seek consent because she sold fresh orange juice and a hot breakfast drink, *arroz con leche*, breakfast items making her very much a competitor. Furthermore, she stood on a corner close to a major bus stop where people could easily stop and buy a drink on their way to work. But she spoke favourably of the donut store. She did say, however, that across the street the people at the liquor store were not very friendly and complained because the women seemed to block the entrance to their premises.

The women street vendors were also conscientious about keeping the sidewalk clean because they felt that it would dissuade customers from buying from them if they were to sell from an area which looked dirty. In fact the state of the cleanliness of the side walk became a topic of a conversation between Dalia and a customer where at one point he asked her if the cleaners had come around and she responded by complaining that they needed to come around more often. In another instance, when I accidentally spilt a bit of *arroz con leche* on the sidewalk, I was told quite firmly by the street vendor that I should have kept the lid on and thereby prevented the milk from spilling over. These observations demonstrate the women street vendors' strong sense of commitment to selling on the streets. Excluded by the city because of bureaucratic and costly rules, regulations, and legislation, these women micro-entrepreneurs create their own normative systems and thus negotiate their spaces in the city.

Because the women claimed the same selling spots every day of the week, they developed a regular clientele. The majority of the customers were working-class Latino men who

took the early morning bus. Most of the men were dressed in jeans, tennis shoes, and a casual winter jacket. Several of them carried backpacks. The majority of the time, the men bought food to take away with them to work. However, some ate and drank on the street and chatted with the women while they ate. A number of Latina women also bought from the street vendors. Similar to the men, they were also for the most part casually but smartly dressed wearing jean leggings, tennis shoes, smart blouses, and handbags with short handles slung over their shoulders. They also seemed to have a warm rapport with the women. On one occasion, I observed that one of the street vendors did not charge her immediately but gave her six tamales on credit. Most of the Latino clientele were Mexicans or Central Americans. Dalia (who sold *pupusas*) made sure that she catered to Mexican taste buds by providing hot salsa on the side along with the side order of *curtido*. On two of the days, I did see some white men buy *champurradas*: They requested their order in a highly accented Spanish. The women also seemed to provide some services to passersby. Sometimes people asked them for coin change in exchange for a dollar bill, others stopped to ask the time, and at other times homeless people requested free tamales. The women readily provided all of these services.

Such positive and indepth interactions by the female street vendors with their customers, their insistent presence on the same spots, their commitment to cleanliness, and the displays of connections with each other, their customers, and the store staff indicate women's quest for participation, membership, and inclusion in the public sphere in this global city. Several scholars have shown that in the majority of instances new diasporas and immigrants tend to live in global cities and thus advance new claims for citizenship which are understood as rights to the city itself (Isin 1999; Flores and Benmayor 1997; Rocco 1996). In the case of Mexican and Central American street vendors, there is much evidence of the ways in which

they asserted their rights and belonging to the city spaces. They not only claim the rights to sell food while living in this global city but they also express the assertion of their rights through various negotiations that helps them gain legitimacy in the public sphere.

Challenging the Police and the City in South Central Los Angeles

South Los Angeles (which is known as South Central Los Angeles to the people who live there) is located south of downtown Los Angeles. In 2003, South Central Los Angeles' name became South Los Angeles since "South Central" became denotative of high levels of gang activity, crime, and endless poverty. South Central became South Los Angeles, but the poverty and the social problems, consequent of the structural inequities, continued in this part of the global city. The bulk of the demographic population included African Americans in South Central, but by the 1980s many families left to live in the growing outer suburbs of Los Angeles. In the 1990s South Central LA began to see increasing numbers of Latinas living there. Presently, in certain parts of South Central, Latinas far outnumber the African American population. The spatial reconfiguration has led to the presence of Mexican and Central American restaurants, *loncheras*, swapmeets, murals of the Virgin de la Guadalupe, and men and women selling traditional Mexican and Central American food items,--all of which indicate a strong and significant Latina presence.

This part of the city did not have a central commercial area, but much like the rest of Los Angeles was marked by auto friendly strip malls. Nevertheless the women sold on various corners and sites such as close to major bus stops, in front of Laundromats or, outside schools, or they simply went from door to door. The majority of the *tamale* vendors sold in the

early hours of the morning, whereas women who sold other food items, such as *raspadas* and *elote*, often went from door to door selling to young children after school hours. There were some women who had the resources to buy a Chevrolet van and sold everything you could possibly buy at a small corner discount store. In some instances, the women shared spaces. For example, at one major bus stop, during the earlier hours of the morning between six and nine, Angela sold tamales, whereas in the later hours of the day Monica sold sliced fresh fruit. Angela's tamales were highly popular, (and among the best I had eaten in Los Angeles): she even had her personal card which emphasized the hygiene and cleanliness in preparation of the tamales. The card read: *Exquisitos Tamales Mexicanos Tamales de Elote, Champurrado, Higiene y Calidad*, showing a picture of a clean plywood floor with pots of tamales cooking on the stove.

Many of the women selling food items other than tamales recognized that it required much skill and a great deal of hard work to prepare tamales and it was for that reason they did not sell them. Indeed, it did require much expertise since not all women who sold tamales were always successful in their business. Although Angela was highly successful as a tamale street vendor since she had a stream of Latina as well as African American clients, she was not free of harassment by city inspectors. Her struggles were the same as those of many other women who sold on the streets of Los Angeles: she had to wake up early in the morning, sell at certain hours, and leave before the police started to come around forcing her to leave.

Despite the city's continual harassment, the women continued to sell in order to pay their bills and support their young children. They articulated to me that they had difficult experiences with the city inspectors and police. They knew that they should have permits but simply could not afford to do so. One street vendor, who was also a very successful tamale vendor, averaging \$60 a day, was stopped by the police eleven times

within a span of three years. But Leticia asserted the legality of her work to me: "*Mi trabajo no es ilegal. Pero es ilegal a vender sin permiso. Pero no es un delito.*" (My work is not illegal but what is illegal is to sell without a permit. But it is not a crime). This view was echoed by several of the women street vendors I spoke to, where they made a distinction between criminal activities and their rights to work. The city and the city's police criminalized the women but they continued to defend their rights to sell in the cityscapes through persistence, endurance, and hard work. At the same time, the women did not idealize their situation and acknowledged their challenges, as Leticia told me, "The main problem in this business is that when one does not have the permit to work and when the city gets you and throws all your things one loses all your invested money. Then one has to start all anew again. Whether you have or don't have capital. When the city throws my things I have to go and buy everything."

Myra, who sold *raspadas* of various flavours from very close to her house came to negotiate the streets in a similar way through persistent labor. She said to me, "The problem is that anytime somebody can call the city on you. When the city comes around they can fine you and give you a ticket. Or the police can come around and seize all your things as well. That happened to me a few times. They took everything and I had to buy everything all over again. We cannot do anything but march forward. But I felt terrible because one is made to feel guilty because one does not have the right to sell." Julia had been resourceful enough to acquire a Chevrolet van, which she parked outside an elementary school. She was a vendor, who was very popular amongst young children, who would rather buy snack food from her at the end of the school day, rather than go to an actual store, also voiced her frustrations with the city health officials, "The city really bothers you. They do not give you permission to sell. They do not let you work. And sometimes the police come around checking for

permits. It is not only the city but it is also the police. " These are the kinds of frustrations faced by several of the street vendors in South Central who repeatedly get harassed; yet they continue in defiance, contesting the city's laws, and gaining acceptance and recognition amongst their customers. The women, who sell in South Central, unlike the women who conduct their business during the early hours of the morning in MacArthur Park, are in some ways more vulnerable to city and police inspections: they sell during different times of the day and in more diverse spaces. Often they might be the lone woman selling on the street. But they remain undaunted and the women narrated to me anecdotes of talking back to the police. Juana, a middle-aged woman in her early fifties, offered me the following account: "One day I was selling on Avalon and Manchester. The police came and told me, "Don't move." He grabbed my bag. I was annoyed. I stayed there staring back at him. I told him that the bag belongs to me. You cannot just come and grab it. One sells and earns for one's children. One is not robbing. I told him that I was simply selling. I am not leaving thrash around here. I clean well. I am just standing here. You have no reason to bother us. For Juana, who was undocumented and selling without a permit, this type of response to the city's police shows that she believed she had the right to work in the city and her sense of entitlement. By invoking motherhood and the right to work, Juana deploys the idea of a collective struggle of all mothers against the city's hegemonic forces. Note that Juana employs the impersonal singular pronoun-*uno* (one) rather than the first person pronoun *mi* (my). This choice of words shows that she does not only try to claim her own rights but also becomes a voice for many mothers who try to earn an honest living. She also believes that if one is "not robbing" then one has the right to work. In this manner, she defends her spatial position and that of other street vendors.

However, it was not always easy for many of the women to challenge the police in such explicit ways. Other women recounted to me that they simply let the police take their things and would start anew. For instance, Beatriz, who repeatedly got harassed on a specific street, decided to change her location: she soon realized that selling in front of clinic although lucrative attracted police attention. Changing locations was not always an easy option, since many of the women developed regular clients, and upon relocation they would lose their customers.

It was not only the street vendors who struggled and claimed rights and recognition on the streets of South Central Los Angeles. The women who managed small family-owned *loncheras* also confronted many obstacles. For women with limited resources, it became very expensive to keep up with the city's ever changing rules and regulations. Their profit margins did not allow them to do so. Some of the city's regulations included parking rules, rules about certain ways of preparing food, rules about the number of windows on the food truck, the fans in the food truck, and the types of food that a *lonchera* should or should not sell. These requirements changed from year to year. With increased competition from gourmet food trucks in the city, the cost of running a *lonchera* grew as well. Yet these smaller family run *loncheras* helped create a sense of community in economically disenfranchised sections of the city. One such truck was that which sold *carinitas* and various meat parts. The raw meats were purchased from an independent Mexican butcher on credit, who used to work for a large meat packing company which sold meats in bulk to various retail outlets. The meat was then cooked in the backyard of the family's house. Each Saturday and Sunday, rain or shine, parked in front of the family's house, on a commercial zone, the *lonchera* operated and sold tacos to its regular customers. Even when the family's house caught on fire and the family moved into the eldest daughter's house, the family

(with some assistance from a neighbour) managed to continue their business. As Maria told me, "My neighbors are very nice people, they let me park the *lonchera* in their house, they offered us a place to cook food. They were very helpful." Thus, despite the many challenges, obstructions, and calamities, Maria always conveyed strength as she continued to maintain her small business over a period of 20 years. Although it was her husband who did much of the cooking, it was she, with some help from her eldest daughter, who managed and operated the business, helped develop a steady stream of clients, and negotiated with city rules and restrictions.

Maria was not alone in her efforts to maintain a small family-run business. The same sentiments were echoed by her nieces, who also operated a *lonchera*, which they parked at a market in South Central Los Angeles. In an interview which ended up in tears, Maria's niece narrated the endless struggles in trying to manage the *lonchera*. "The city constantly changes the rules and regulations every year and it is just hard to keep up. It becomes costly." Yet they continued to sell and struggle through the city's bureaucratic demands, making small changes, so that they the city would leave them alone in order to continue with their business. In battling with the authorities, the women actually assert their membership in the city in ways that help them to conduct their business and enable them to continue to support their families. Very simply, the city has the power to grant or cancel the vendors' permits, a power that could either help them continue with their vending activities or push them into poverty.

Displays of Belonging in Glassell Park

On a relatively mild summer's day, a middle-aged woman could be seen from a distance pushing a shopping cart, at a recreation park in North East Los Angeles. She reached the

park area just outside the swimming pool and parked her cart. A man wearing a small felt hat was sitting on the edge of a wall. As the woman claimed her spot in front of his cart, she somewhat obstructed the view of this male street vendor. Both the man and woman were in competition with each other, since both of them were selling summer time food items. The woman sold *raspadas* in various flavours such as tamarind, vanilla, and coconut, to mention a few, and the man sold freshly cut sliced fruits topped with salt, lime juice, and chile. The woman vendor's prices were relatively much cheaper, than what one would pay at an ice cream store. Children of predominantly Mexican heritage could treat themselves after a swim in the recreation park's pool to a *raspada*, paying only a dollar. As the woman claimed her spot, the man glanced at her, somewhat annoyed. She explained her position to him, "Well, people can see you from far away. You are much bigger than me and you are wearing a *sombrero*. If I don't stand right here nobody will be able to see me." The hat, the man was wearing, did not look like a *sombrero* to me, but he simply shrugged his shoulders and let her stay on her spot. She later asked him to watch her cart when she went on a short break.

Following these observations, I approached the women street vendors at this park and asked them for interviews.

The street vendors who sold at Glassell Park in North East Los Angeles appeared at relative ease. I interviewed five of the women who sold food items at various times of the day in this recreational centre, and they all told me that they got along with the staff at the park, all of whom were Latinas, and that the police and the city did not really bother them at this site. What was significant was that the women I spoke with articulated their sense of ease in Glassell Park as compared to some of the surrounding areas of Los Angeles where they sold when they were not selling there. They compared their experiences in these much more hostile and unfriendly spatialities

with their experiences of selling in Glassell Park. For instance, in an interview, Cecelia gave me the following account:

The police have got me a lot of times. They took my little cart. They have given me tickets. I could not do anything. Then I learn to live with. Life has to go on. The first time the police got me was in Echo Park. I cried and cried and then I learnt to live. In the *Allies* (a commercial area in Los Angeles with shops which cater mostly to a Latina/o clientele) also there are a lot of police. Because many people sell pirated goods, there are a lot of drugs, and many people rob. Yesterday, for example, there was a big raid. There were a lot of police there. I have been selling there for a lot of years but it is no good. It is better I sell here. Here it is much calmer. There are no problems. In the *Allies* one has to be super alert-super alert-super. I simply sell there on the weekends but I take another cart which is not so good because I am sure when they come they will take away everything. Therefore I like to sell in this park. Yes (smiles). Because it is calm and there are no problems.

Paula expressed a similar opinion about selling in Glassell Park recreational center. She said that it was much calmer than nearby Highland Park where she goes to sell *raspadas* from house to house to children after school hours:

It is very calm here. Here I also know a lot people. When I walk around they know me. Because in other parts of the city there are many problems. I like to sell in Highland Park because I have a lot of clients. The people who have children come out and buy. But the police and city don't allow us to sell on the streets. In Highland Park, it is difficult because the police is very hard. One time the police me that I needed a permit to sell. I told him that I am working. He told me to go but did not take my things. I am very vigilant. But I know if the city health inspectors come around they will seize everything. But there is no solution. I came here to work. To move forward. To strug-

gle to have something better in life. I hope that I have more opportunity to work. I only want to work.

In comparing Glassell Park's relatively relaxed environment with other geographical spaces where they have to be on high alert, the street vendors show a sense of belonging to this community space. Furthermore, they help recreate the park's relaxed atmosphere where children can look forward to treats and first generation Latina immigrant parents find opportunities to chat in Spanish with the women vendors. In many ways, these women street vendors transform the stark Los Angeles recreational parks devoid of cafes and small eateries, readily found in many cities in the world, to a lively communal space for Latina immigrants and their children. In discussing the notion of cultural rights and civil society, Flores (2003) writes that, by advocating for and claiming rights, Latinas define their own communities and interests even though what they contest may not explicitly be state or class rule. Such advocacy can turn into a social movement. In this small sized urban park, Latina immigrant undocumented women - by staking out their territory and by performing acts of belonging come to represent their community's interest. These interests include the ability to work and to be recognized within the larger society, in the same manner that they are by the park's staff members and the people who use the park's services. Moreover, the observations and interviews show that Latina women are not bound to fixed urban spaces in Los Angeles, but rather are linked to differing geographies within the expansive city and to the city's larger politics. Hence, the street vendors' battles and sense of belonging cannot be simply understood as being limited to fixed urban contexts, but rather occurring in a spatial continuum. As De Genova (1998: 97), writing about Mexican Chicago comments, "Chicago cannot be understood as a mere "context" assumed to provide a singular field where social life happens to take place, and

Mexican immigrants in Chicago cannot be enclosed within an encompassed space of homogenized cultural isolation." Similarly, the Mexican and Central American women's experiences of street vending cannot be reduced to self contained locations. The street vendors constitute part of a much larger urban politics and economy.

Concluding Comments

Rainer Baubock (2003) wrote in his essay REINVENTING CITIZENSHIP that democratic citizenship is the outcome of struggles over who should be included and excluded from polity. Citing Isin (2002), he points out that such struggles do not only emerge in urban settings but that the city becomes the battleground through which diverse groups define their identities, stake their claims, wage their battles and articulate their citizenship rights. The women of Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran origins who sell food on the streets of Los Angeles to support themselves and their children come to be criminalized by the city inspectors and the police. Harsh language and behaviour from the city's official authorities constitute the undocumented street vendor's everyday reality. *Muévete!* (Move along!) *No tienes permiso!* (You don't have permission!) *Necesita permiso a vender!* (You need permission to sell!) are the words that they encounter while they work to earn an honest living in the city. Furthermore, they become vulnerable to deportations. Yet the women who formed part of this study battled their way through the city's bureaucracies and continued their microenterprise in order to support their children. When confronted by the police and city inspectors, they felt criminalized, no doubt, as many of them were forced to change locations or "*escondarse*" (to hide), but collectively they contested the city's laws through the eighties, the nineties, and the noughties. *Adelante*, (March forward) *La*

vida sigue (Life goes on), *Y empecé otra vez* (I started again), *Que uno no se deje vencidos* (one must be not defeated) were the expressions that the women, I spoke with, invoked as they defended their rights to micro-entrepreneurship. Whether the women who formed part of this study overtly or covertly challenged the police and the city inspectors, they articulated their rights collectively. In MacArthur Park, the women all sold between the hours of 6 and 9 in the morning, they collectively left at the same hour, they collectively negotiated with the businesses, and they all respected each other's selling spots. In South Central Los Angeles, where they sold from varying spaces and during different hours, they all negotiated the city inspectors and the police in similar ways, such that there was an unspoken solidarity amongst the street vendors. In Glassell Park, the women came together and negotiated with the staff at the park, so that it became a comfortable and an enjoyable place for them to conduct their business. By engaging in such spatial practices, undocumented women who re-create the Los Angeles cultural public sphere, express their citizenship rights not always through formal structures, but rather through small acts. It is these struggles for spatial justice which then help legitimize their business endeavours and their rights to the city spaces over three decades in the eyes of the people who continue to buy from the vendors.

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