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(De)Constructing the Grocery Store: An
Ethnographic Examination of Spatial
Characteristics and their Implications for
Social Inclusion

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Abstract

I acknowledge that this research was conducted on land stolen from the Mattabesic, Paugusett, and Schaghticoke tribes which is currently occupied by a Western colonial power.

This study examines the physical characteristics of the interior of New Haven grocery stores and how these are designed to socially include or exclude racial minorities. Drawing upon critical race theory and using ethnographic research methods, I analyze similarities and differences amongst selected independent American and Asian grocery stores and how they communicate their cultural values to various social groups. Even if it is not explicit, white supremacist values are embedded in these spaces. This study critically examines how to represent BIPOC cultures and sociocultural values into general grocery stores across the nation. The differences observed among the sampled New Haven grocery stores speak to the important role of culture and cultural values in making food socially accessible to different racial and ethnic demographics.

Keywords: ethnography, grocery store, culture, race, food access

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I acknowledge that this research was conducted on land stolen from the Mattabesic, Paugusett, and Schaghticoke tribes which is currently occupied by a Western colonial power. I want to thank my partner for providing Chinese translations and to my family for inspiring several aspects of this study. Without my family and our love of food, this study and its subsequent analyses would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my advisers, Dr. Danya Keene and Dr. Denise Lim, for their guidance.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
INTRODUCTION	4
METHODS	8
ANALYSIS	12
CULTURALLY CONSTRUCTED GROCERY SPACES	12
RESOURCE AVAILABILITY AND USAGE IN GROCERY STORES	22
CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY & APPROPRIATION IN GROCERY SPACES	27
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION	32
REFERENCES	37

Introduction

Food-related health in the United States (US) has become a major national concern in recent years given the dramatic increase in obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and food insecurity rates. Current research shows that highly segregated areas throughout the country tend to be low-income, consisting predominantly of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who have limited access to affordable and healthy foods (Powell et al., 2007; Andreyeva et al., 2008; Galvez et al., 2008; Giang et al., 2008; Reynolds, 2015; Williams, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2020). Racially segregated neighborhoods tend not to have physical or financial access to healthy food options, and thus must rely on fast food restaurants and convenience stores for sustenance (Powell et al., 2007; Galvez et al., 2008; Chandon & Wansink, 2012; Hilmers et al., 2012; Reynolds, 2015). Regular consumption of highly-processed foods, like those sold at fast food restaurants and convenience stores, can lead to Type II diabetes, obesity, and heart disease (Powell et al., 2007; Galvez et al., 2008; Story et al., 2008; Chandon & Wansink, 2012; Reynolds, 2015; Williams, 2018). As a result, public health interventions, such as establishing grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods, have been implemented to address food-related health disparities with limited success (Andreyeva et al., 2008; Giang et al., 2008; Block, 2010; Ayala et al., 2013; Escaron et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2014; Thorndike et al., 2017; Engler-Stringer et al., 2019; Sutton et al., 2019). Making food available in historically marginalized areas is not enough. We must consider and contextualize the white supremacist overtones found throughout US food history and how they have been physically perpetuated into the modern day.

To understand how and why current food-related health outcomes are the way they are, we must understand the political history of urban food environments. Over a century ago, urban residents would typically obtain locally grown food from nearby markets and purchase non-perishables from a general store (Gwynn, 2009; Lorr, 2020). In the years following the first grocery store in 1916, urban populations could access hundreds of foods grown from any given part of the world and other household necessities in a single place (Gwynn, 2009; Lorr, 2020). The growing popularity of grocery stores since its inception has drastically changed how modern Americans obtain and experience food. Yet, the seeming abundance in grocery stores has not made significant strides in reducing food insecurity, particularly for BIPOC communities. While some grocery stores have been established in or near low-income communities, these businesses struggle to thrive due to low sales and customer retention (Powell et al., 2007; Galvez et al., 2008; Chandon & Wansink, 2012; Hilmers et al., 2012; Williams, 2018). Grocery store chains subsequently avoid or hesitate to establish sites in low-income neighborhoods, while fast food restaurant chains and convenience stores actively target these same areas (Powell et al., 2007; Galvez et al., 2008; Chandon & Wansink, 2012; Hilmers et al., 2012, Williams, 2018). Because of this, there are fewer quality healthy food options in low-income BIPOC neighborhoods than in high-income white neighborhoods (Powell et al., 2007; Galvez et al., 2008; Chandon & Wansink, 2012; Hilmers et al., 2012; Reynolds, 2015).

Racist food practices, however, have not deterred BIPOC people from creatively providing food to their communities. Chinese immigrants, primarily men, in the late 1800s came to the US to mine gold in San Francisco, California and build the Transcontinental Railroad. With the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese immigration and naturalization

was halted, leaving Chinese men living in the US stranded, since they could not afford to return to China with their low incomes. Other federal and state laws (particularly in California) were passed to prohibit Chinese men from earning fair wages in “masculine” jobs, as a means to preserve white purity in all formal aspects of US society (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015; Rude, 2016; Anderson et al., 2018). They were only able to do “women’s work,” such as cooking food and laundering clothes, causing a boom in the Chinese food and laundry industries. Due to the many racist laws and attitudes they faced, Chinese immigrants formed Chinatowns as a means to preserve their Chinese culture in a foreign environment and find reprieve from anti-Chinese racism (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015; Rude, 2016; Anderson et al., 2018). Within these ethnic enclaves, Chinese food markets inevitably were established so that Chinese families could purchase culturally relevant ingredients. When the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the National Origins quota system in 1965 were abolished, more Asian people were able to enter the US, leading to the increased number and popularity of Asian grocery stores throughout the country (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015; Rude, 2016; Anderson et al., 2018).

Today, grocery stores are communal spaces that can play a powerful role in bringing people together and forming a sense of collective identity as the stores accomplish their intended purpose: provide healthy foods. The materials used to create communal spaces can hold and convey the social values most important to a community’s dominant culture (Mazumdar et al., 2000; Block et al., 2008; Caspi et al., 2017; Namin & Dehdashti, 2019). These seemingly small details act as some of the many subliminal messages that reflect the dominant culture’s salient norms, values, and morals to bring the community together as a

cohesive unit. As much as a space can shape community members' experiences, community members too can shape and change the meaning and values of a space.

As inclusive as these spaces can be to people of similar values, communal spaces can become socially inaccessible to "social outgroups" (that is, people who operate outside cultural normative behaviors). Even if the communal space in question does not explicitly exclude social outgroups, the space's finer details can still convey to social outsiders that they do not belong to the dominant community. This can have larger implications for how stigmatized social groups in the US access basic services and necessities like food. While the grocery store serves to provide food for the general public, it can be organized, designed, and decorated in a manner that signals to who and what the store values. In the case of Chinatown, food markets were organized and designed to showcase authentic Chinese culture aimed towards potential Chinese customers rather than potential customers of other racial or ethnic backgrounds.

How we experience a communal space is influenced by physical materials and social constructions of who and what is valued during a set time period. The physical, social, and temporal aspects of space interact with each other to define a given place and influence people's experience of space and place together (Gallagher, 1993; Gieryn, 2000; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Kernan, 2010; Glanz et al., 2016; Caspi, 2017; Warnick, 2017; Alyari, 2018; Jang et al., 2018; Iva & Robert, 2019; Gray et al., 2020). This spatial construction can lend itself to a person's sense of communal identity and social belonging, in addition to how they will behave with others in that environment. Time plays an important role in the social and emotional constructions of a space as a space's meaning can be encapsulated in a specific time and be perpetuated in the future, long after the people who defined the space's

significance are gone. For example, Chinese American food markets started out as a way to replicate a phantom home (China) for the local Chinese immigrant population. Over time, Chinese American food markets continued their cultural legacy as a space for Chinese American descendants to encounter and practice their ethnic heritage, even if the descendants themselves have never seen their motherland. While Chinatowns and Chinese food markets have evolved over time to include space for cultural exchange, they do not have social outgroups at the forefront of their minds. Similarly, white American grocery stores are built by and for a white majority, using materials and designs that reflect white culture and not other BIPOC cultures.

This paper examines the physical characteristics of New Haven grocery stores and what these characteristics imply for those who are socially included or excluded as a result. Drawing upon critical race theory and using ethnographic research methods, I analyze similarities and differences amongst American¹ and Asian grocery stores and how they communicate their cultural values to different social groups.

Methods

In this study, I utilized ethnographic and visual sociological methods to identify and analyze grocery store characteristics. Using Google Maps and local knowledge, I chose to examine four New Haven grocery stores: Elm City Market, Million Asian Market, Edge of the Woods Market, and Hong Kong Market. These stores were chosen based on their various missions, business models, and niche cultural purposes. Elm City Market is an independent

¹ In the context of the study, the word “American” refers to mainstream white culture.

urban grocery store located in downtown New Haven, at the intersection of Chapel and Orange Street, that provides “healthy ingredients” to local residents (“Home Page”, n.d.). This site was selected for its centralized location and business orientation towards healthy food access in an urban environment. Million Asian Market is an Asian grocery store on Orange and Crown Street, about a block and a half away from Elm City Market, and it provides culturally specific food items to the surrounding Asian population. This Asian market was chosen for its service to a niche cultural demographic and its status as an independently-owned business. Edge of the Woods Market is a health foods store located on Whalley Avenue, between Winthrop Avenue and Norton Street, and they provide health-oriented, environmentally-conscious families with safe and healthy natural products. It was selected for its vegetarian/vegan niche and status as a family-owned business that loosely follows the co-op model (“About Us”, n.d.). Hong Kong Market is another Asian grocery store located on Whitney Avenue, between Trumbull and Audubon Street, that provides culturally specific food items to the surrounding Asian population. Similar to Million Asian Market, this Asian grocery store was selected for its service to a niche cultural demographic and status as a family-owned business (Cheang, 2020).

Using a grounded theory approach, I took several photographs of each store on my phone camera, cataloguing images of food products based on categories that are expected to be in all grocery stores, regardless of culture. These expected food categories include dry goods, meats, refrigerated or frozen food items, snacks, and produce. Photographs of store aisles were also taken to better visualize the products in their surrounding environment. I collected a total of 131 photographs of all sampled grocery stores. Of the 131 photographs collected, 92 photographs were selected for NVivo analysis: 36 of Elm City Market; 22 of

Million Asian Market; 16 of Edge of the Woods Market; and 18 of Hong Kong Market. Using slow-looking techniques, I identified and coded the colors, level of organization, types of materials used, signage quantity, text styles and languages of aforementioned signage, and product variety that were visible in the photographs.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several safety precautions were taken to prevent disease spread. I collected photographs and ethnographic data of the sampled grocery stores during weekday off-peak hours when it would be less likely for other customers to be present. As a result, I know less of the racial demographics of frequent customers given that I took precautions to decrease the risks of infection and transmission.

Careful examinations of these food spaces called for a deep examination of myself—why do I feel the emotions I feel in each specific place? How has my cultural upbringing influenced the differences I'm noticing throughout these spaces? I am an Asian American woman who was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, an urban environment with a large Asian population. Growing up, I would often accompany my mother and grandmother to the grocery store, both Asian and American. Having been regularly exposed to these different ingredients in the Asian stores and at home, I know exactly what these products are and how they can be used without being able to read or understand Chinese languages. However, many of the products in the Asian grocery stores contain Vietnamese text, which I can read and understand. My multilingual literacy provides a different perspective and experience of the sampled grocery stores that monolingual researchers do not have access to. My identity and experience thus allows me to recognize and examine the cultural nuances within each of the sampled spaces. I acknowledge that

the subjective nature of my analysis is not representative of all Asian American experiences or that of other “hyphenated” Americans.

Health experts often push for the public to eat healthier foods as a healthy diet means fewer illnesses. But food is so much more than just its physical benefits; it is the intimate medium through which we connect and communicate with others, regardless of time and space. To this day, food is a central aspect of how I relate to my family members and vice versa. Growing up, I would see and help the women in my family prepare elaborate Vietnamese dishes for everyone to enjoy at family gatherings and to take home as leftovers. If we were celebrating a death anniversary, we would set aside some food we’d made and light incense so that the ancestors could enjoy this meal with us. In hard times, such as illness or emotional hardship, we would prepare and bring each other food. Even now, my mother and grandmother, who live in California, send me specialty Vietnamese ingredients I cannot access in New Haven, Connecticut. It is through food my family communicates love and care for each other. It is also how the older generation has passed on our Vietnamese heritage. Now that I am an adult who lives thousands of miles away from her family, it is through making traditional Vietnamese dishes and frequenting Asian grocery stores that I feel closer to my family and ethnic heritage. Much of what I cook is Asian-American food, necessitating shopping at Asian stores like Hong Kong Market to obtain distinctly Asian ingredients like fish sauce and rice flour, or at American stores like Elm City Market to obtain more American ingredients like Lactaid milk and pasta. Inevitably, as I pass through these spaces as a researcher, I cannot help but notice the many cultural nuances embedded in the stores’ interior features, what these details say about

authentic American and Asian spaces, and for whom these spaces were designed to socially include or exclude.

Analysis

Culturally Constructed Grocery Spaces

How a space is constructed and organized has much to do with culture. Very broadly, culture can be defined as a collection of beliefs and values that bind a group of people together and reflect common interests based on various social constructs such as race, ethnicity, or nationality. For the grocery business, the question of culture is of utmost importance as the grocery store must reflect the values and cultures of its surrounding community.

Take Elm City Market, for example—the store’s name reflects its ties and dedication to the City of New Haven, otherwise known as the “Elm City” for its numerous elm trees (Finlay, 2014). The market’s brand includes green and blue, colors present in the city emblem (Image 1). The combination of colors and name is a marketing strategy to indicate the store is a space for New Havenites. The food and household items found in the store are



Image 1: Elm City Market's logo (left) uses similar shades of blue and green as New Haven's city emblem (right).

to the benefit and good health of all New Haven residents. With its open, bright design, there is a particular warmth one might feel as they enter this space.

I entered Elm City Market from the northwest entrance (Photograph 1). Passing through the sliding doors, my eyes were greeted with a rainbow of brightly colored produce, all looked fresh and in abundance. Past the foreground, I could see the dairy section and several other aisles, just as abundant as the produce section. To my left were the check out and wellness sections of the store. What I saw from the entryway was only approximately half of the store.



Photograph 1: Elm City Market northwest entrance view.

I flashed back to Million Asian Market, the store I had just walked from before entering Elm City Market. You see, Million Asian Market is less than half the size of Elm City Market; in the entryway of Million Asian Market, I could see to nearly the back of the store (Photograph 2). At first glance, I could tell that there was a smaller variety of products in Million Asian Market than Elm City Market. Several cardboard boxes are stacked on top of each other throughout Million



Photograph 2: Million Asian Market entrance view.

Asian Market, filled with products one could find on the shelves, whereas in Elm City Market, cardboard boxes could occasionally be found neatly flattened in a cart by an employee restocking the shelves. The produce section of Million Asian Market was much smaller than that of Elm City Market. Even though there were many colors in both these produce sections, the produce colors in Million Asian Market were obscured and dimmed by their loose plastic coverings. There was not nearly as much plastic in the produce section of Elm City Market. Whatever plastic remained was pushed further away from the entrance. And the plastics near the entrance were harder plastics, rather than loose, to give the appearance of a clean, sleek, and perfectly organized space.

Each of these two spaces tell vastly different stories of which cultures these stores are meant to appeal to or target. Of course, there is the obvious difference in how the store names speak to different racial demographics, but looking more closely at how these spaces are organized by culturally-specific products shows how specific ethnic groups are marketed to and targeted. Much of Elm City Market's interior design is meant to invoke the feeling that you as the consumer can have everything you need and want, but Million Asian Market's interior design doesn't necessarily do so in the same way. With a smaller space, everything feels more condensed and cluttered compared to Elm City Market. Million Asian Market's aisles, as well as those at Hong Kong Market, have cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other throughout the entire space. In these Asian markets, functionality and practicality take priority over eliciting certain emotions or aesthetics. Since there is a small yet significant pan-Asian community in the area, these "mom-and-pop" markets, with the store space they can afford, are simply trying to fulfill a need for ethnically specific ingredients beyond what can be found in American grocery stores. As a result, Million

Asian Market and Hong Kong Market attempt to pack as many different ethnic staple products into their available space as possible to cater to the Filipino, Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese customers in the area, at the cost of pleasing aesthetics. Because culturally-specific foods are generally hard to find in the New Haven area, these Asian markets trust that customers will overlook their cluttered space as these businesses are fulfilling a niche demand.

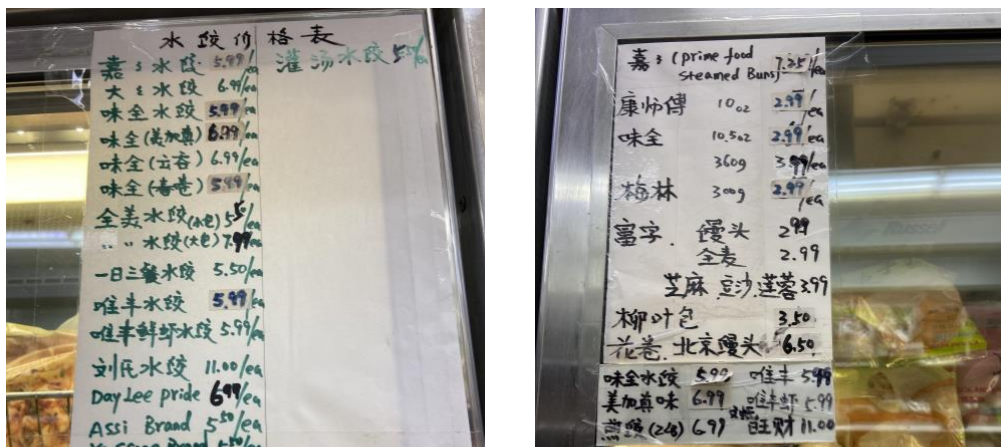
The Hong Kong Market and Million Asian Market employees prefer to speak in their native tongues with customers who can understand. A simple head nod and a curt hello to the clerk escape me as I enter, almost as if out of habit. Other customers in the store converse with each other in their respective Asian languages. I find this comforting since growing up in San Jose, California, it was normal to encounter several languages other than English, both oral and written, in public common spaces. In Connecticut, it's always a pleasant surprise to hear multiple languages in a single space; it's even more pleasant when I hear people speak Vietnamese.

In the Asian markets, I recognize nearly all the items throughout the store, down to the brands. Sometimes I'm happily surprised by what I find, not having thought of this item in so long or knowing this is not something easily found, or both even. In the Hong Kong Market, I encountered the household items and was immediately brought back to childhood upon seeing the small plastic stools in various bright colors and the wooden brooms held together at the handle by colored plastic. I remembered how I would use my tiny pink plastic stool to sit on while eating, to stand on to reach higher spaces of the house. I remembered how my grandmother would use that stool while she peeled carrots and daikons for pickling. I remembered my mother and grandmother sweeping the house with

those wooden brooms. My mother still has one of those brooms in her house today. I remembered whenever I would visit any of my Asian friends' or relatives' houses as a child, they would have these very same brooms and stools.

Similarly, in the Million Asian Market, I was so surprised to find coagulated blood as it's considered a foreign delicacy in Western eyes, but knew exactly how I could prepare the blood if I wanted to buy it, drawing on the memories I had of my mother and grandmother's cooking.

While continuing my examination of store items, I notice that there are not any labels on the shelves for what exactly these products are nor how much they cost. I pick up a 16 oz. bag of rice flour I would typically use for bánh cuốn (steamed rice cakes). In descending order, the bag itself contains text in English, Thai, Chinese, French, and Vietnamese. Many of the products throughout the Asian stores are written similarly, depending on where they are regionally from. Rice flour is a staple ingredient in East Asian and Southeast Asian cuisine, hence the presence of the Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese languages. The French language is printed on the rice flour due to France's century long colonization of Vietnam, causing many older Vietnamese people to be fluent in French.



Photograph 3: Handwritten signs in Hong Kong Market frozen section. The featured paper signs contain primarily Chinese text and some English text. They are taped to the top corners of a freezer door.

I look around for other signage. In Hong Kong Market, there is only one printed sign, in both English and Chinese, indicating that meat, vegetables, and household products are downstairs. The other signs throughout Hong Kong Market are hand written, mostly in traditional Chinese characters.

Downstairs, there is a glass case to the immediate left of the stairs that holds various cuts of meat. A square piece of paper is taped to the top left corner of the case. The first line of text is written in traditional Chinese characters, while the second is an English

interpretation of the original text. Both lines convey the same message, but the English text is clearly translated from Chinese to English as there's a particular linguistic roughness to the English text. It conveys an accurate message to customers what the business is asking of them, but has a certain awkwardness around it that can be seen in the chosen words. For example, "picking" is not a word that is commonly used in colloquial American English, but would still be linguistically understood by English speakers.

Another example is the selected word "window"

to reference the moveable glass pane. By conventional standards, the moveable glass pane is not actually a window; other American English speakers could classify the moveable glass pane as a sliding door.



Photograph 4: Handwritten sign in Hong Kong Market meat section. This sign contains Chinese (top) and English(bottom) text written on white paper that is taped to the top left corner of the glass case.

This seemingly small translation speaks volumes about how the owners are rooted in Chinese thought. The written Chinese language is starkly different from the English language, using logographic characters that read from right to left, top to bottom. Even with the hundreds of different languages and dialects in China, every literate Chinese person can understand the written language, though how the text is interpreted can vary based on the person's spoken language or dialect. Furthermore, Chinese written language utilizes cultural context and word order to construct meaning. The sign in the meat section, for instance, could be interpreted by one Chinese person as a crudely formed message, whereas another Chinese person could see it as a very polite message. These linguistic differences have a subtle, but strong influence on how the grocery store owners communicate their intentions in Chinese and English to customers.

Million Asian Market also has multiple languages throughout the space. Their printed section signs are typed in English, Chinese, and Korean. The few handwritten signs here are only in Chinese, making it impossible for non-Chinese speaking people like me to understand what is being conveyed, if not for my knowledge of the ingredients before me.



Photograph 5: Million Asian Market produce section sign. The section sign is printed in English, Chinese, and Korean (left to right).

For instance, in the frozen section of Million Asian Market, there were two pieces of cut red paper with Chinese characters written on them, pointing in two different directions. I looked in both directions. On one side, all the ingredients to make a soup base were present, while on the other side, all the additive ingredients, like noodles and fish balls, were present. Returning my gaze to the signs, I recognized the left sign's top character as "fire." With context clues and my trivial knowledge of the Chinese language, I realized the sign was likely indicating the foods in these directions



Photograph 6: Handwritten red signs in Million Asian Market. The signs contain Chinese text. The left sign translates to "hot pot" and the right sign translates to "Wet ingredients to the left, base ingredients to the right."

were for hot pot, a common family-style Asian soup dish that allows for a variety of base and additive ingredients to adapt to anyone's taste preferences. Later, I asked my partner to translate the handwritten text. He told me the left sign's characters directly translate to "fire pot" and is universally understood as "hot pot" when the characters are put together. The right sign's bottom character means "ingredient", while its top left character means "wet" and its top right character means "base". Put together, the red signs roughly read, "Hot pot. Wet ingredients to the left, base ingredients to the right." If I didn't know what these ingredients were or what the sign said, I would not have been able to understand how to use these food items, thus providing me little to no incentive to buy them.

The languages and ingredients present in the Asian markets provide customers deep insight into who these spaces are for: Asian people living in the US. Even though Hong Kong Market and Million Asian Market have products from China, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan,

the Philippines, and Korea, most of the signs in these markets are in Chinese and English because the market owners are native Chinese speakers and proficient in English. Because the Chinese language is highly contextual and strikingly different from the English language, this heavily influences how the Asian market owners construct the food space. Their way of thought is rooted in a Chinese cultural lens that they then have to translate into American English for other non-Chinese-speaking people to understand and access. Priority is naturally given to Chinese products in the markets, but given China's long colonial history throughout Asia and global cultural dominance, other Asian people still recognize and identify with distinctly Chinese food products. For instance, Vietnam was colonized by China for over a thousand years, leading to many shared or similar cultural foods. This intercultural mingling is in part why many food products like rice flour are labeled with multiple languages.

On the other hand, Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market only have signs in English, heavily implying that these markets' are rooted in Western thought. Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market, on the surface, do not adhere to any specific racial or ethnic culture, but rather, they appeal to the eco-conscious, healthy foods culture, something that is supposed to transcend race and nationality. In recent years, with the rise in obesity rates and climate change, many environmentalists and eco-enthusiasts in the US have created a culture that holds the production and consumption of food to a higher ethical standard. That is, they aim to purchase foods that are grown in ways that respect the Earth and living beings at every level. Some examples of this are purchasing locally made food products and items labeled as fair-trade and/or organic. Some within the culture also promote avoiding harming animals in the food production process. Edge of the

Woods Market and Elm City Market most certainly cater to this niche culture through the products they have chosen to display. The majority of items in both Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market are labeled with where they originated from and how they were produced (e.g. fair-trade, non-GMO coffee from Ethiopia). Compared to the Asian markets, the American markets have more locally sourced products such as ice cream from Arethusa Farm Dairy. These markets also have more vegan and vegetarian products such as vegan eggs, vegan cured meat, and nut milks because vegetarian and vegan diets have a smaller carbon footprint than meat-heavy diets.

BIPOC cultures around the world have long practiced food traditions that respect the Earth and all its living beings even as they must do harm to nourish themselves. Specifically, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs have long practiced vegetarianism and veganism out of respect for other living beings. Many, including Asian people, have a cultural practice of using every part of an animal so as to not let anything go to waste. Even though environmentalism and food justice are not new concepts, they have been recently popularized by white people. Because alternative food practices in the US have been popularized by white people, the displayed food products and sources in Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market are heavily influenced by white culinary preferences. Part of catering to this culture in the American grocery space entails the continuation of feeling as though the customer still has constant access to the rest of the world and can make eco-conscious, ethical consumer purchases. As a result, Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market have a diverse array of foods from around the world that are labeled as non-GMO, sustainably sourced, fair-trade, etc. as a way to signal to customers that these businesses also share the customer's values regarding the environment and healthy foods.

Resource Availability and Usage in Grocery Stores

In order for the sampled American grocery stores to effectively cater to this niche culture, they need to have access to resources that will help the grocers fulfill customer demands and maintain product supply. Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market have much larger spaces to display a greater variety of products to customers compared to Million Asian Market and Hong Kong Market, reinforcing the American supermarket mindset of constant access to everything from everywhere. They also can afford storage space for surplus products and space dedicated to non-food related items. In Elm City Market, there is an open multipurpose space that has been used for live performances and other community events. Edge of the Woods Market has an upstairs area where customers can purchase used books and clothes. However, Million Asian Market and Hong Kong Market have no such spaces. Not only can the American markets afford these extra spaces, they also have the money, product access, social connections, and human power to maintain them.

Furthermore, the American markets have a significantly greater amount of signs than the Asian markets. Of the 16 photographs I took of Edge of the Woods Market, I counted 1,014 signs total. All Edge of the Woods Market signs were printed with only seven signs containing handwritten text. Of the 16 photographs I took of Hong Kong Market, there were a total of 322 signs. The majority of Hong Kong Market signs were printed (293) and 30 signs were handwritten.

The signs in Edge of the Woods Market, as well as those in Elm City Market, tended to be more densely populated with information than the signs in Hong Kong Market. Edge of the Woods Market signs that were designated for labeling brand products uniformly contained brand name, PLU number, barcode, price, and price per unit. All Edge of the Woods Market product signs were printed in English on small, rectangular pieces of paper that were typically slipped into a plastic sleeve below its corresponding product. Elm City Market product signs were designed similarly.



Photograph 7: Edge of the Woods Market bulk section. This section of Edge of the Woods Market contains several similarly structured product labels that are uniformly placed on individual bulk items.

However, Hong Kong Market signs did not have the same level of uniformity as Edge of the Woods Market signs. Product signs only contained printed price tags on a bright pink sticker, measuring about 2.5 centimeters long and 1.3 centimeters wide. The price stickers were placed onto individual products by a sticker gun. There appeared to be no discernible pattern over sticker placement. Occasionally, price stickers would fall off the product and stick to the floor and shelves. Some products would have two price stickers. As a result, not every product had a price sign. There were hardly any product labels provided by the store. It was almost as if there was an assumption by store owners that customers could read the packaging labels to know what the products were. If a product did not come with manufactured packaging labels, the grocers provided handwritten labels in Chinese, and sometimes in English. The materials of

these signs varied; dry bulk goods were usually labeled using paper. But for seafood, the store owners used either cardboard or hard plastic scraps to write product labels and prices. All product labels were placed above corresponding products, a subconscious decision that may reflect how the Chinese language is read from top to bottom. As a family-owned business, Hong Kong Market consists of a small bilingual staff. Because of the staff size, the business may not have enough resources to create more uniform signs in both Chinese and English.



Photograph 9: Hong Kong Market fish section. A variety of fish sit in ice-filled cardboard boxes. Each box has one to two labels to indicate the fish type and price.



Photograph 8: Hong Kong Market root vegetables section. Each sign varies in size. The product labels are written on paper and taped to the shelf. Most of the labels contain Chinese and English texts. Others have only Chinese text. And others only have price labels.

Given the pandemic, all sampled grocery stores had varying degrees of safety precautions posted throughout their space. While all grocery stores required employees and customers to wear masks and social distance, the materials each store used differed from one another. Elm City Market, in particular, had printed floor labels to remind

customers to practice social distancing. Upon entering the store, customers can see a large label on the floor that reads:



Photograph 10: Floor sign in Elm City Market. The yellow floor sign contains black serif text that reads "Maintain social distance."

These signs, like the one above, were also placed in the check-out areas. The store had signs in each aisle encouraging customers to not touch products unless they intended to purchase that particular item. Elm City Market had large enough aisles that floor signs were placed to indicate in which direction customers should move. They also placed colored tape in the middle of the large aisles to encourage people to move in one direction on one side. While the precise material of the floor labels are not known, they are clearly durable as the edges do not appear frayed and there is some discoloration.



Photograph 11: Social distance floor signs in Elm City Market. Several floor signs such as these can be found throughout the store. Floor signs are spaced approximately six feet apart to facilitate social distancing.

The other grocery stores did not have as much COVID-19 signage and used more commonplace tools like printing paper and colored tape. Edge of the Woods Market had printed signs near the store entrance, reminding customers to practice social distancing. In all three other stores, the grocers placed colored tape on the floor to mark distances of six feet only around the check-out area. The large

differences in how each market creates and uses their signs indicates access to formal marketing knowledge and the amount of human power they possess to execute said knowledge into practice. Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market have a higher degree of uniformity in the signs they use to label products and store sections, demonstrating these two businesses have a marketing team with access to formal market research and practices. While Edge of the Woods Market had some variety in how they labeled store sections, the sections signs still adhered to a particular branding style—curvy centered font with colors and symbols generally associated with that food category. Similarly, Elm City Market’s COVID-19 signs are all of the same material, font, and color scheme. Social distancing signs contained black serif text on yellow backgrounds, and directional signs contained white arrows on light green backgrounds.

The size of a grocery store and how the store



Photograph 12: Edge of the Woods Market section signs. In the middle ground are two large section signs, seemingly painted on wood, hanging from the second floor banisters. The left sign reads "Health and Beauty" in a top-down gradient from yellow to green, with a large green pump bottle and blue toothbrush behind the words. The right sign reads "Herbs" in a similar yellow-green gradient as the left sign, with a white mortar and pestle behind the words.



Photograph 13: Edge of the Woods Market bulk foods section sign. The yellow English text is painted on a black and brown wooden background.

creates their signage speak the

to

networks and resources a grocery store is plugged into. The differences

between the American and Asian markets are striking as the American markets clearly

have access to formal knowledge and social connections that would allow them to have larger spaces, a greater diversity of imported and locally-sourced products, and uniform, information dense signage, while the Asian markets have fewer connections and resources to be as largely scaled. There is, of course, nothing wrong with smaller store space or less uniformity in signs, but these differences imply the inequities in resource distribution across different cultural groups throughout New Haven. What I've observed of American and Asian grocery stores in New Haven fit my own mental constructions of culturally authentic markets outside of historically ethnic enclaves in that American grocery stores are larger and have high product variation, whereas Asian grocery stores are smaller and have fewer resources.

Cultural Authenticity & Appropriation in Grocery Spaces

The word "authentic" typically refers to an object that is genuine or original. In terms of food, authenticity includes adhering to cultural traditions. However, this term and its meaning are obfuscated by our increasingly globalized, blended world. The US in recent years has become much more racially diverse, particularly in urban areas. With diversification comes people introducing, sharing, and changing their cultural traditions with others from different cultural backgrounds. This sharing and mixing can be seen distinctly in food. More restaurants and chefs are cooking fusion foods, blending together seemingly unlike cultural cuisines to create a new dish and changing traditional flavors to appeal to varied palettes. So then, what is "authentic"?

All the sampled grocery stores market themselves as "authentic" to customers in different ways. The American stores are more explicit, labeling and displaying products

with the words “authentic” and “traditional”, particularly on products from non-white countries. They will also label their products as “organic” to show their customers the food product is in line with the customers’ values. When looking at these ethnic food items that claim authenticity, I don’t recognize the brands. In Elm City Market, I encounter a particular sauce brand in the ethnic food aisle. The sauces are in glass containers, labeled with plain black English text describing the flavor. At the bottom of the container, it reads “Traditional & Authentic”. I look towards the top of the jar to see the flavor: Thai Peanut sauce. The other available brand items are popular Thai flavors.

I feel myself become incredibly emotional, water gathering in my eyes. Who made these products? What do they taste like? Do they actually taste like they should or is it just a flavor catered to the white palette? Why was there even a need to label these products as “traditional and authentic”? Asian product brands don’t have such labels. Nor are such labels ascribed to other products such as pasta. While I understand that “authentic” is subjective and dependent on personal experience, I cannot help but mentally label these ethnic products as inauthentic.

My emotional reaction to these products speaks to the deeper psychological constructions of the Authentic. Authenticity itself is grounded in long-standing traditions that represent a specific culture. In order for these traditions to be established, the object must be presented repeatedly in specific spaces and times to reinforce its cultural significance. The resulting association between the object and the culture influences our understanding of tradition, whether consciously or unconsciously. When repeated throughout a person’s lifetime and over generations, the sense of tradition and authenticity are further cemented in the mind. When this implicit process is done on multiple sensory

levels, a person may no longer be able to discern the fine details of *why* an object is authentic, but rather seem to simply *know* or *feel* something is authentic because the object and culture have been reinforced several times in the past. The Authentic is intricately tied to nostalgia in that when we encounter an object, our psychological associations between said object and a culture can warp our perceptions of time and space.

For example, phở is the most well-known Vietnamese dish, typically consisting of a flavorful bone broth, rice noodles, onions, and beef, because of mass Vietnamese migration following the end of the Vietnam Civil War in 1975. Phở is believed to have been a result of French colonization in that Vietnamese cooks would prepare this soup for soldiers, serving different cuts of beef (the French's preferred meat) according to the soldier's ranking. Today, it is common for Vietnamese people to eat phở for breakfast, though it can be consumed at any time of day. Many non-Vietnamese people love phở for its simple yet flavorful ingredients and cross-cultural familiarity, so much so that instant phở has become increasingly popular in grocery store aisles like Elm City Market and Million Asian Market. Instant phở makes it easier for non-Vietnamese people to consume this dish at home, rather than going out to a restaurant that has phở on the menu. While many Vietnamese people I know have expressed how it feels good to be represented in food spaces, others, including myself, see instant phở as inauthentic. I frequently jest that instant phở is sacrilegious to Vietnamese culture and to this day have never tried it, despite the positive reviews I have heard from other Vietnamese Americans.

These negative emotions surrounding instant phở stem from the strong memories many Vietnamese Americans such as myself have of phở. For me, I remember my mother and grandmother would begin preparing the broth on Friday nights in a large pot. Come

Saturday morning, we would wake up to the smell of phở wafting throughout the entire house. Whenever family members came to visit from towns without a large Vietnamese population, we would go out to phở restaurants shortly after they arrived. My grandmother would occasionally serve me phở as my after-school “snack” so that I would have enough energy to do my homework after sports practice. In college, my friends and I would end our night out with some phở. When I first moved out of California, to ease my homesickness, I made phở from scratch. As the broth came to a boil, it smelled exactly the way it was supposed to, transporting my mind to my childhood home. Much of how we understand and perceive the Authentic comes from our nostalgia of a past that isn’t readily accessible to us at present. When an object, like instant phở, does not meet all the criterion for the Authentic, a person will deem said object as inauthentic because it no longer fits the past they are trying to invoke. This then begs the question: Whose past are we nostalgic for?

In bell hooks’ “Eating the Other” (1992), she describes how white culture aims to consume “the Other” as a way of revisiting a colonial past, what she terms as “imperialist nostalgia.” In designing the American grocery store, the grocer wants to be inclusive of everyone and make consumers feel as though they have access to everything from everywhere. While these desires may be well meaning, they can be perceived inauthentic and reflective of an imperialist nostalgia for cultural dominance over “the Other,” or in this case, BIPOC food culture (hooks, 1992). The imperialist mindset and nostalgia is most evident in the construction of the ethnic aisle. Given that in recent years *Latine*² and Asian populations have rapidly increased, more grocery stores are including Latin and Asian food

² The use of *Latine* is considered to be a more inclusive and grammatically correct term to refer to people of Latin American descent.

products on the shelves of usually a single ethnic aisle or section. Segregating non-white food products from “white” food products in itself otherizes Latine and Asian cuisine, reinforcing the hegemony of whiteness as Americanness, even though Latine and Asian peoples and cultures have been an integral part in the nation’s historical and contemporary sociocultural development.

When examining what products are present in the ethnic aisle, it is an amalgamation of the most popularly known ethnic products to white people like assorted rice noodles, beans, salsa, Thai peanut sauce, and Indian curry spice mixes. The selection of ethnic products through a white American lens, rather than the corresponding ethnic lens, signals to white customers that this part of the store is still for their consumption. It is exotic enough that it is separate from whiteness, but not so much so that it strays drastically from the white palette, as with the case of phở. In this manner, white customers can continue consuming and dominating other cultures because they have perpetuated that Asian foods are not a part of the American identity. The US has long been viewed as a “Melting Pot” of people from all over the world, creating a multicultural society. However, certain “foreign” foods, like pizza, have become synonymous with American culture, while others, like fortune cookies, are not. Pizza, a savory Italian pie, is most closely associated with Americanness even though it was brought to the US by Italian immigrants. While many know of pizza’s ethnic origins, how pizza is labeled does not typically correspond with its Italian heritage or any other ethnic descriptor; it is simply assumed to be American. However, the same is not true of fortune cookies, which are labeled as Chinese, but were created in California by Japanese American bakers. Based on where the fortune cookie was made, it is an American food, but white Americans see it as a foreign Chinese dessert that

comes with their Chinese takeout. Such differential labeling of what is American food has racial overtones of who is considered to be a part of the American identity. At present, the American identity does not include Asian and Asian American people, and this hegemonic conceptualization perpetuates the otherization of Asian-identifying people in the food industry.

Discussion & Conclusion

The differences among the sampled New Haven grocery stores speak to the important role of culture and cultural values in making food feel accessible to different racial and ethnic demographics. The words, languages, products, information, and other materials that grocers choose to use can provide customer insight into whose culture is valued within the grocery store. In the Asian markets, the Chinese and English languages are used intentionally to cater to a larger linguistic demographic as a way to signal to Chinese and other Asian people that this grocery space has an authentic variety of products that reflect Asian cuisine. In contrast, the American markets focus more so on product diversity and visual aesthetics with only English signs to signal to white Americans that this grocery space reflects their desire for a healthy, eco-conscious global experience. None of the grocery stores are explicitly excluding certain social groups, but these seemingly small details likely contribute to how social outgroups may feel out of place, or even discouraged from shopping in a particular place.

Current food marketing strategies and practices in grocery stores utilize emotional responses to food, particularly childhood nostalgia, that are related to white culture (even though there is no direct or overt language to indicate as such). Grocery stores use their

selected resources to elicit specific emotions in customers as a way to enhance their experience of the store. Doing this on a broad level requires appealing to cultural norms or culturally shared experiences. As a result, presenting culturally shared experiences to invoke nostalgia among social in-groups reinforces positive emotions in the grocery store. However, when a social outsider encounters the nostalgic prompt and feels nothing, there is no opportunity for positive reinforcement to occur within that space. Because food is a medium for the continuation of culture and tradition, people tend to gravitate toward the familiarity of pleasant childhood memories. When pleasure is not elicited, especially in a space that holds such intimacy, the social outsider will seek out the pleasure elsewhere. In this case, Asian-identifying people may not associate pleasure with American grocery stores because these spaces do not evoke nostalgia. Thus, Asian-identifying people may turn to ethnic grocery stores for a more nostalgic experience.

Much of current food-related interventions and research focus on the affordability and physical accessibility of food for low-income BIPOC communities, but cultural accessibility is not often considered. It is not enough to make food more accessible or affordable, we also need to consider what ingredients and languages are present; and how food is marketed to evoke specific meanings and feelings from consumers. Even if people can afford and access healthy foods, they may not consume the healthy foods because the foods are not culturally familiar or evoke nostalgia. As such, the role of nostalgia and emotions should be considered in how food is marketed.

This study relied on photographs of public spaces. Due to COVID-19, I was not able to collect photographs during peak business hours. When conditions are safer, future research should interview customers about why they choose to go to certain grocery stores

over the other, as well as store managers about why products are organized and labeled as they are. Food-related interventions should involve ethnic grocery stores, such as African American, South Asian, Caribbean, and Latin markets, and learn from how food is marketed and culturally framed in these spaces. BIPOC grocers have lived experiences of navigating multicultural and multilingual spaces that could greatly contribute to food-related interventions. Future studies and interventions should more closely examine the ethnic aisle of grocery stores. While the ethnic aisle can be affirming in some ways, it can also be othering because it sends the message that the products in this space are different from the rest of the products in the store. American food markets need to more carefully consider how they may be inadvertently otherizing BIPOC people within the community. A potential solution to create a more inclusive environment would be to reorganize products by food category and storage needs. For example, rice noodles would be situated next to pasta. Products could also be organized and labeled by country of origin to respect diverse cultures. Regardless of how the ethnic aisle changes, it must be dictated by a representative community advisory board.

This study brings up several questions about how to represent BIPOC cultures and sociocultural values into general grocery stores across the nation because white supremacy is embedded in these spaces, even if it is not explicitly so. Signs in conjunction with available space speak volumes about how much funding, effort, and time each business allocates to providing for customers. The amount of materials, words, and languages used all subtly inform consumers the kind of funding a grocery store receives. Elm City Market and Edge of the Woods Market had larger stores, product selection, and English signs than Million Asian Market and Hong Kong Market, indicating the American grocery stores, that

reflect white culture, have a larger budget to support their operations. How people engage with BIPOC food and food culture also perpetuates white supremacy, particularly when a product label emphasizes its authenticity and exoticism in contrast with whiteness. Such practice can contribute to the otherization of BIPOC groups, especially Latin- and Asian-identifying people who have immigration histories dating back centuries.

To effectively reduce food insecurity, we must consider how we can build a sense of community and belonging for all people, not just a select few. Deconstructing white supremacy in food spaces requires everyone to question our implicit biases toward associating the average American with whiteness as our framework for representing any given space. We must regularly ask ourselves: What words or practices are white grocery stores using that otherize BIPOC cultures and perpetuate racial stereotypes? How are we inadvertently promoting the commodification and appropriation of ethnic foods? How can we (i.e. those of us in positions of power) show appreciation instead of appropriation? How do we respect ethnic culinary traditions in light of racist food history while making room for change in our multicultural society?

There is nothing inherently wrong with changing food traditions and cultures as the very nature of culture is fluid and malleable across time and space. In fact, engaging with cultures different from our own cannot only be productive in a capitalistic sense, but it can also strengthen social bonds as people have the opportunity to share parts of themselves with others and form new memories and cultural traditions.

However, when historically marginalized cultures are changed by historically oppressive cultures without respect for the marginalized culture, there is a problem due to the longstanding power differential between the two parties. Although Asian Americans

are viewed as the monolithic “Model Minority” who have worked hard and achieved the “American Dream”, anti-Asian racism, like the “Forever Foreigner” myth, has long existed and continues to permeate US society, even in food markets. In Elm City Market, pasta noodles and rice noodles are stored in separate sections, even though both are considered dried grain products. Pasta, Italian in origin, is not labeled as “traditional and authentic” whereas rice noodles are labeled as such because rice noodles are a foreign food generally originating from Asia, and its authenticity must be verified in order for the pleasure of imperialist nostalgia to be fulfilled. In many ways, the racial undertones of labeling and pricing food products reflect the colonization process as white people are dictating what non-white foods can be considered as authentic, exotic, and delicious. White grocers “refine” select Asian foods to sell to other white people so that they can feel as though they are indulging in an exotic, worldly food experience without having to travel far from home. It cannot be emphasized enough that sharing cultural dishes can be a rich experience of cultural exchange and social bonding, but such interactions must be done respectfully of racial histories and of cultural culinary traditions.

Food is vital to human life. Beyond its function as physical sustenance, food is important to mental, social, spiritual, and community health. It is how we form relationships with others, how we communicate, and how we learn about our cultural history. As we move towards food justice, we must recognize food beyond being a survival need as a powerful sociocultural tool. We must challenge our most basic assumptions of who and what formulates the “average American” and increase community involvement in how we construct food spaces.

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