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Eating Spaces and Places: Examining the Latin@ Barrio, Chinatown, and Black Urban Space as Sites of Collective and Social Imagination

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Eating Spaces and Places: Examining the Latin@ Barrio, Chinatown, and Black Urban Space as Sites of Collective and Social Imagination

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The experience of growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has caused me to interrogate perceptions of urban spaces since a young age. Milwaukee is consistently ranked one of the most segregated cities in America by many studies, including the 2011 Frey-Dewitt study in which it scored a dissimilarity index of 81.5 out of 100 (“0” meaning “completely integrated” and “100” meaning “completely segregated”) (Kertscher). I attended public schools in neighborhoods that people in the area typically refer to as “the ghetto,” “the inner city,” or “the hood.” This simultaneously confused and frustrated me as a child. My elementary and middle schools were in a very different neighborhood than my high school, yet people still labeled and perceived the spaces in startlingly similar ways. It did not seem to matter that the two neighborhoods had different histories, community identities, and geographical locations. All that seemed to matter was that they had one characteristic in common: most of the residents were, and still are, Black. The Milwaukee neighborhood bordering downtown and Lake Michigan that my family owns a home in is, on the other hand, predominantly white and middle to upper class. I felt like I belonged to the neighborhood I lived in and the two neighborhoods where I attended school because I spent so much time in the three places and was fiercely taught to have pride in each, but I also was very aware that I returned home to a different reality on a daily basis than the majority of my classmates. Growing up in a metro area that is very polarized between the suburbs and the city and where even within the city limits some neighborhoods seem worlds apart, and as an inhabitant of a complicated position between outsider and insider to these spaces, I have always been fascinated by perceptions of
space and how they are formed. I am also intrigued by the idea that abstract ideas, such as people’s perceptions of space, can have concrete and very real consequences. Thus, when I was presented with the opportunity to write an honors thesis, I knew I would want to engage both race and space/place, two themes that have had a profound impact on how I view the world. This project is especially meaningful to me because I engage with three Midwestern cities, including Milwaukee. This choice was very intentional, which I will discuss in further detail throughout my work. This work comes from an American Studies perspective and is extremely interdisciplinary, utilizing the multiple tools and frameworks that enrich this interdisciplinary field. It draws heavily from Geography as well, which is part of my intervention in showing the necessity for distinct disciplines to work more closely together.
Introduction

Conceptualizing Collective and Socially Imagined Neighborhoods

When one is prompted to think of a neighborhood, what comes to mind? What does a “bad” neighborhood look like? What does one find in a “good” neighborhood? While neighborhoods are physical spaces with houses and living human beings, they also exist abstractly in the imaginations of everyone. As Anthony King very concisely wrote: “the city exists in our heads” (qtd. in Cinar and Bender xii). In her anthropological study of a neighborhood in Santiago Chile, Julia Paley asserts that the neighborhood was rarely visited by anyone who had not already encountered the imagination that surrounded it (21). She describes the idea surrounding a neighborhood as almost a “mystique” (21). She means this by “what goes unspoken” (21). Images stand in for words because even just saying the name of the neighborhood invokes a strong reaction (21). Similar to my personal experiences growing up, as I mentioned in my prologue, the neighborhoods where I attended school were located in completely different parts of the city but understood in very similar ways in the collective imagination of Milwaukeeans (and those from the surrounding suburbs).

This act of imagining is not a solitary act, hence my use of the word “collective” in the title and throughout this work. I chose to consistently use both the terms “socially imagined” and “collective” to describe the concept that my research engages because
these neighborhoods are both. They are socially imagined because society imagines these
spaces and places in a certain way which thus informs how individuals understand and
conceptualize them. However these concepts are also collective. Although each
individual may have his or her own and different conceptualization of various
neighborhoods, the power in how this imagination impacts physical spaces lies in its
collective nature. These social-imagonings are so profuse because they have been
collectively formed- and thus are collectively called upon. This formation process is
complex but can be greatly attested to how the city is remembered and conceptualized.
Martin J. Murray explains, “the meaning of city-sites resides not in their architectural
forms alone, but in their use and the collective memory of that use” (Prakash and Kruse
149). Similarly, Alev Cinar and Thomas Bender describe the act of imagining spaces and
places as having “constitutive power” because imagination works on a collective basis,
which makes it a “public process” (xiii). The powerful implications of this will be
considered further in this honor’s thesis.

So, this concept of social-imagination is two-fold. Not only do socially imagined
and collective concepts of specific neighborhoods and spaces exist (concepts that may or
may not be accurate), but also socially imagined concepts of general tropes of
neighborhoods exist. In other words, there is not one specific neighborhood in mind when
people imagine this trope; rather, it is a culmination of perhaps several neighborhoods of
this type that this individual may have seen, and more predominantly, the trope of this
type of neighborhood that is commonly presented in the media, in literature and other
forms of mass media or communication that reach large numbers of people. This enters
into the realm of distinguishing between the concepts of space and place, which I will
engage further with in Chapter one. Either way of looking at the concept, both sides demand the question of *so what?*

More directly, cities exist both physically and in our social imaginations. This dual existence of the abstract and concrete may seem inconsequential. After all, imagination is purely intangible. Yet as Cinar and Bender argue, collective narratives, “…tell the story of the city, produce its history, set its boundaries, define its culture, hierarchically situate its dwellers around race, class, religion…They are then mapped into certain city spaces and removed from others” (xiv). Although purely abstract, collective narratives have very physical results. Certain parts of cities are labeled and coded with specific adjectives and describers and this social imagining leaves a physical impact on the city itself and changes how people interact with it.

It is necessary to ponder the roots and producers that come together to form collective and socially imagined concepts of neighborhoods in order to understand their potential impacts. As Arlene Dávila argues, understanding what accounts for constructions of representations is vital because all knowledge is “socially positioned and created” (5). Doing so can lead to a more nuanced understanding of knowledge that is often automatically assumed to be fact (Dávila 5). Patterns and cultural markers that one may find in neighborhoods across the United States, which is the geographic focus of my research, contribute to people’s conceptions of collective and socially imagined neighborhoods. Obvious sources such as, “literary texts, popular media, films, and the daily discursive reality of inhabitants” accentuate and harden these ideas (Cinar and Bender xv).
But what are these cultural markers and patterns and why are some more recognizable and easy to diffuse than others? In the U.S. it is not common to differentiate between neighborhoods based on the style of street lamps or the number of mailboxes. Rather, as I experienced growing up and alluded to in the preface, neighborhoods are often very clearly marked and differentiated between by labels that have to do with race, ethnicity, class and culture. Sometimes it only takes the label for people to assume that the characteristics exist while other times if the characteristics exist, people automatically label the neighborhood in a certain way. For example, from my personal experiences in a Midwestern, Rust Belt city context, I have found that people will often assume, calling upon racist and problematic stereotypes, that a neighborhood that is labeled as “Black” will have corner stores and be dangerous. On the other hand, sometimes people assume that a neighborhood will be inhabited by mostly Black people if they see corner stores in it and it is commonly perceived as dangerous. Joshua F. Inwood attests this to places being “imbued with racial significance” or in other words, the argument in certain Geography circles that “places can be racialized” (147).

America’s socially constructed, complex and troubled relationships with race and ethnicity impact physical space just as much as they affect people on a daily basis. The history and current reality of residential segregation continue to shape how people conceptualize and perceive space and reciprocally, also racial and ethnic identity. Often people have no choice in where they settle and thus how they are perceived. As Lila Fernández notes: “As much as working-class people have worked to create homes for themselves in urban communities, structural conditions and market imperatives ultimately determine the future of neighborhoods, the profit and desirability of real estate
markets, and the ethnic/racial composition of those communities” (qtd. in Pérez, Guridy, and Burgos 247).

The stratification of places and individuals must be viewed hand in hand (Logan, Molotch 20). The very intentional physical creation of neighborhoods is strongly correlated to how they are perceived and determine to a large extent their functions. However, the impacts of spatial segregation are nuanced and cannot always be analyzed in clear-cut terms. In a discussion of the segregation of Mexican and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, Lisa García Bedolla notes the positive and negative aspects of segregation on the development of a community of color, "Here again we see the two sides of residential segregation: the creation of the barrio allowed for the maintenance of Mexican cultural life and the development of group solidarity, but the concentration of the population was not by choice and limited Mexican American's social, economic, and political opportunities" (48). Thus clearly, the distribution and construction of space decidedly impacts those that inhabit it and vice versa. Henri Lefebvre famously pondered: if space can be constructed by people, can it also be read (7)? Ángel Rama argues that cities can in fact be read like texts but the question remains of how the particular nature of construction of a space impacts how it is read, even years later (qtd. in Valle, Torres 101).

Transnational immigration and migration, which are connected with questions of racial identity but also must be examined separately, also have shaped and continue to influence residential patterns. As Cinar and Bender argue, “Voluntary and forced migration around the world transplanted people and cultures from their original places of
birth to regions and cities far from their places of origin. In the process, there was planted, in “racial,” ethnic, linguistic, gender, religious, and cultural terms, the potential for what in the future would become the flows and spaces of globally created and “imagined” identities…” (8). As many academics argue, not only do these flows of people and ideas shape the patterns of how people live and settle, but they also influence how people conceptualize identities to begin with. To push this one step further, how are imagined communities formed around these imagined identities? Bennedict Anderson argued in his groundbreaking book *Imagined Communities*, that although it would be impossible for an individual to meet everyone in a neighborhood, they have an imagined concept of what they think the neighborhood is (6). People have a common understanding of the neighborhood’s identity because it is collective and socially imagined. This imagined concept is often formed by repeating themes of identity or perceived identity that then contribute to collective and socially imagined concepts of neighborhoods.

However, sometimes these themes of identity are assumed rather than in existence or are assumed and then made to exist. For example, as I discussed above, often people assume characteristics because of the label or assume the label because of certain characteristics. Furthermore, some neighborhoods cannot be easily assigned one collective identity if, for example, there is a high level of racial diversity. I posit this not as a negative; on the contrary, data shows that many Americans, if given the choice, would like to live in a more diverse area (Kolko). Taking this a step further, sometimes neighborhoods that are not predominantly inhabited by a certain racial or ethnic group are still given the label of that group, for several reasons. For example, Little Italy in Chicago is still called thus despite the fact that it is no longer inhabited primarily by Italians and
Italian Americans. However the focus of my research will be on neighborhoods that are traditionally assigned the identity of one predominant racial or ethnic group and where the population numbers of the area reflect this label. I acknowledge that identity is not limited to just the racial makeup or ethnicity of an individual and that it is "situational and socially constructed" because at any given time, individuals may hold multiple identities (García 176). My intention is not to ignore the complexity of identity or assume that the most salient identity of my three neighborhoods of investigation is always racial or ethnic. Rather, race and ethnicity are the lenses of analysis that I used to explore my sites of investigation but I certainly do not wish to negate the complicities of the identities of the individuals who inhabit my neighborhoods of study.

The question thus arises, provided that one acknowledges the concept of collective and socially imagined understandings of neighborhoods, of how collective and socially imagined conceptions of neighborhoods affect real, existing spaces and therefore the people in them. What truly happens when the abstract meets the concrete, often quite literally? Lefebvre eloquently stated, demonstrating the need to examine this relationship that, “Knowledge falls into a trap when it makes representations of space the basis for the study of ‘life’, for in doing so it reduces lived experience” (230). Any study of space must also be carried out with a study of the life that inhabits it. Thus, I want to push beyond examining simply representations of space (or as I define it, collective and socially imagined conceptions) to seeing what happens when this is made to go into dialogue with the concrete.
Research Questions

A probe into the creation of every single type of imagined community that exists would be an unrealistic endeavor. Furthermore, every individual has varied conceptualizations of “types” of neighborhoods and this often cannot be articulated into words or concrete explanations. Thus, for my research I focused on three specific neighborhood tropes that are commonly understood and accepted in the American imagination due to their proliferation and acceptance in sources such as “literary texts, popular media, films, and the daily discursive reality of inhabitants” (Cinar and Bender xv). The three specific neighborhood tropes I study are the Latin@ Barrio, Chinatown, and Black Urban Space. I want to see what happens when imagination is made to go into conversation with the concrete. What happens when the abstract and physical collide? After exploring what these tropes are commonly understood to be, I examine how collective/socially imagined concepts of these three neighborhood tropes show up in and play out on physical examples of these spaces. I explore how people’s collective and social imaginings of these spaces impact how they view and interact with physical examples of the neighborhood tropes. By physical examples of the tropes I identified three currently existing neighborhoods in the Upper Midwest that commonly self identify and are perceived by greater society as examples of each of these tropes. Furthermore, I searched for neighborhoods that statistically represent this label.

The three specific neighborhoods I examine are the South Side of Milwaukee, Chinatown in Chicago, and North Minneapolis. Although the labels do not fully do justice to the diversity and complexity of each neighborhood, they do reflect census data
results in showing that each of the spaces is respectively predominantly Latino, Asian American or Black. According to 2010 census data, Chinatown in Chicago is 89% Asian American (“Mapping the 2010 Census”).¹ The heart of the Southside of Milwaukee in a concentrated twenty-five-plus census track section is consistently over 65% Latino (Bloch). North Minneapolis’ largest racial majority is Black with 43% according to one source, but I will also examine in Chapter Four why it is difficult to determine exact numbers (Ashmore).

To more specifically interrogate collective and socially imagined concepts of these spaces and their effects on the physical spaces themselves, I choose a specific site of analysis in each neighborhood. On the South Side of Milwaukee I analyze the Mexican restaurant La Perla, in Chinatown I analyze the Chinatown gate and from North Minneapolis I analyze the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis.”

If the imagined affects the real, does the real also reciprocally affect the imagined? I have already begun to argue that this is the case, by proposing that some existing patterns and common cultural themes in neighborhoods across the country contribute to commonly held perceptions of certain neighborhoods. Through the three sites of analysis I strive to find if the concrete also contributes to the abstract. Can this process be considered a full circle? How does one impact the other? To determine this, I put the theory surrounding what the tropes of the three neighborhoods are and their possible sources (the abstract) into conversation with my three sites of analysis (the concrete) by showing how my three sites of analysis were symbolically and often
physically consumed. I then examine ways that the concrete channels back into impacting the abstract through this consumption.

**Methods, Methodology, & My Positionality**

For each case study I applied both different methods and methodologies in order to approach them from numerous angles, but also maintained two overarching frameworks of analysis throughout. The use of different methods and methodologies was not only intentional but also necessary due to the obvious differences in my sites of analysis. Inherently looking at a gate requires a different lens than at a restaurant or a music video. In terms of methods, in order to determine the extent of consumption in each site I carry out a cultural analysis of several insider and outsider representations and perceptions including restaurant reviews (in the case of La Perla), blog entries, youtube comments and quotes from interviews. My analysis is qualitative and most of my cultural texts were accessed online. I also carried out limited observational field research and analyzed census and demographic data. In terms of methodologies, I utilize many different critical lenses influenced by numerous areas of study including but not limited to Border Theory, Food Studies and Film Theory to guide my analysis.

The first framework I applied to each case study was a spatial analysis framework. First I attempt to define what socially imagined and collective conceptions of the specific neighborhood trope are and speak to some possible sources and explanations for this understanding. Next I carry out a spatial analysis of the three physical neighborhoods based off of two general concepts that Lefebvre identifies as being related “methodologically and theoretically” to social space: form and function (147). According
to Lefebvre, “Each of these approaches provides a code and a method for deciphering what at first may seem impenetrable” (147). In terms of analysis of form, I will concentrate on a, “description of contours and the demarcation of boundaries, external limits, areas and volumes” (Lefebvre 148). More specifically I will examine the physical geographic boundaries, population, and approximate dates of settlement of each neighborhood in order to establish background information and set the context for my more in-depth analysis. I will also discuss the labeling of the neighborhood and if its naming is contested and/or complicated. In terms of function I will concretely define what my understanding of the functions of each site of analysis is. I will attempt to objectively as possible address the following questions: 1) Who produced this? 2) What were their possible intentions? 3) What are their potential prejudices? 4) Who is the intended audience? 5) Who is the actual audience of this? This part of the framework is particularly important considering Anthony King’s discussion of the overprivileging of the visual in the analysis of landscapes. He notes on page 136,

…the phrase “visual culture” segregates and privileges that which is seen from that which is thought, constructed, bought, sold, exchanged, inscribed in memory, or forgotten. It is this misapprehension that permits objects, be they paintings or buildings, to be seen as primarily visual rather than social, economic, or, ultimately, political objects that have a range of meanings.

Thus I find an explanation of the social and functional roles of the sites of analysis also vital to this discussion of also the visual in order to attempt to gain a complete and nuanced understanding of each site of analysis, especially considering the social nature of space. Dell Upton similarly argues for the necessity to attempt to read the unseen
(“physically absent or imaginative”) parts of landscape in order to gain a deeper understanding of its existence (177).

As an overarching framework for analyzing how socially imagined and collective concepts of my three neighborhood tropes impact the physical spaces in my three neighborhoods of examination, I use bell hooks’ essay “Eating the Other” in order to establish to what extent and in what way my sites of analysis (La Perla, the Chinatown gate, and the music video) are consumed and furthermore, offered up for consumption by all players involved. Through my analysis I will demonstrate that the relationship between the social imaginary surrounding communities of color and the physical neighborhoods themselves often involves consumption and appropriation in a way that is not always immediately noticeable, or is done in a way that is easy to conceal. I argue that this consumption is often justified and taught by collective and socially imagined understandings of these types of neighborhoods. Furthermore, consumption is often a main or the only point of contact between communities of color and outsiders to their neighborhoods.

My methodology is informed by my positionality. As a white, middle-class, private liberal arts college educated female, I am not an insider to any of the spaces that I research and study and therefore must address the problematic of participating in a long history of white, educated and privileged researchers entering communities of color and extracting knowledge. Although I attempt to study each site of analysis from the perspectives of both insiders and outsiders, I must recognize that even my examination of the “insider” perspective will always be shaped through the lens of that of an outsider. I
often struggled with the question of if I have the right to enter these spaces and attempt to
make grand statements about these cultural texts that are from communities to which I do
not belong. The answer is simple; I certainly do not have the right but I also tried my
hardest to not do that, but rather to continue a conversation using a voice shaped by my
experiences in Milwaukee and using the tools that American Studies has provided me.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one sets the context for the spatial theory that I utilize throughout the rest
of the presentation of my research. I also define the bell hooks framework I use to
analyze my three sites of analysis and the criteria utilized to determine the impact that the
collective and socially imagined concepts of the tropes my three neighborhoods of study
had on the concrete space. The further discussion is divided among three chapters. One
chapter each is dedicated to the South Side of Milwaukee, Chinatown in Chicago and
North Minneapolis respectively. In Chapter two I argue that the owners of La Perla
construct a profit-driven environment in which superficial images of Mexican culture,
such as a mechanical chili pepper and unfounded claims of authentic food, are
normalized. They construct this authenticity by both attaching themselves to socially
imagined concepts of the Latin@ Barrio as well as by claiming concrete space on the
South Side through naming it. However, they only achieve this by relabeling concepts of
both the South Side and Latin@ Barrio as less threatening and more accessible to
outsiders. In Chapter Three I argue that the Chinatown gate represents both a symbol of
exotic difference to attract tourists that was very recognizable because of its associations
with the social imagination surrounding Chinatowns and a symbol of the strength,
resilience and life of the existing community of Chinatown in Chicago. Thus the gate represents as Lan comments, “tensions between Chinatown as a cultural/ideological construct and Chinatown as a living, breathing Chinese American community” (13). I argue Chinatown is viewed as a place that outsiders should gaze at; and that the gate in particular represents this. The gate is a medium through which the space of Chinatown is consumed because is it considered one of the “places to see” in the neighborhood. It is seen by visitors as an anchor to frame the rest of Chinatown as an exotic space accessible to outsiders and is done in a superficial way that demands no true understanding of the history or complexity of the space. In Chapter Four I argue that in order to facilitate and promote consumption of “Hot Cheetos and Takis,” the kids who perform in it utilize to their advantage recognizable Hip Hop tropes connected to Black urban spaces, in order to create a very accessible product to consumers. By employing recognizable tropes from well known, mainstream Hip Hop music videos, the video invites a consumption of the space that is instantly accessible because of how common this is. Although much of the consumption of the music video by viewers demonstrates a humanization of the young performers and the space they represent, there were also countless instances in which viewers attached negative and stereotypical parts of the social imagination of Black urban spaces to the music video and presented the youth as threats. Viewers also consumed the video in a way that promoted more consumption, both of the music video itself and of the material snack products.

Finally, I address my final research question of if this can truly be seen as a cyclical process and if concrete examples of the neighborhoods also impact abstract understandings of generalized tropes of these neighborhoods. I argue that while each
neighborhood site interrupts and perpetuates in varying ways the social imagination of their particular site, overall there is a dual nature of consumption on the part of outsiders and an offer of consumption on the part of insiders that creates certain paradoxes. These spaces are simultaneously both embraced and resisted, claimed and pushed away. This connects to the complicated notion of consumption itself and the superficial relationship that consumption requires the consumer to have with a space. One can consume without engaging and immediately there after exit the situation. Consumption requires no long-term contact and therefore is not as dangerous as it could be. A key part in consumption is the element of control. Because these spaces are far yet close, familiar yet foreign, they can be consumed when the consumer wants to because he/she has control over the situation. I argue that the superficial consumption that occurred in each neighborhood site to different extents overall worked to perpetuate collective and socially imagined understandings of the three tropes: Latin@ Barrios, Chinatowns and Black Urban Spaces because the consumption of these sites was often done without much thought or intention. Although some interventions did occur, such as in Chinatown, an attempt to also portray the gate as a symbol of the vibrant community and in the humanizing and positive responses to the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis,” overall the cycle was continued.

By attempting to take on three immensely different neighborhoods, inevitably detail and depth will be lost. This research is not meant to provide definitive answers to any questions but rather to highlight and utilize the extremely interdisciplinary nature of American Studies in order to center an often side-lined and overlooked conversation about race and place in a geographical region that is personally relevant and emotionally and physically close to me. My three chapters should not be seen chronologically but
rather as three separate case studies, although of course, as Lefebvre would argue by spatial law, all three of these social spaces are intertwined (86). When relevant, I will draw parallels among the separate neighborhoods to bring attention to this.
Establishing Theories: The Sociality of Space and bell hooks’ Place

“The more carefully one examines space, considering it not only with the eyes, not only with the intellect, but also with all the senses, with the total body, the more clearly one becomes aware of the conflicts at work within it, conflicts which foster the explosion of abstract space and the production of a space that is other” –Henri Lefebvre (391).

It is vital to distinguish between the concepts of space and place before any fruitful discussion of the sites of analysis can begin. Thinking of space and place as two separate categories is a fairly recent binary formation in geography circles. Starting as early as the 1950’s and 60’s many key thinkers began to push other geographers to see space as a surface on which “the relationships between (measureable) things were played out” (Hubbard, Kitchin, Valentine 4). This period, which would later be recognized as having revolutionized the discipline, is known as geography’s ‘Quantitative Revolution’ (4). By the 1970’s most human geographers completely bought into the concept of space and place as separate concepts. Before that point most did not even entertain notions of the concept of place. Many academics considered space to be “a neutral container” or merely a “blank canvas” that happened to be filled with human activity (4). This conceptualization of space suggests that it can be understood outside of human existence rather than playing a large role in shaping elements of social life (4). Thus, it plays the
part more of a backdrop “against which human behaviour is played out” (Hubbard, Kitchin, Valentine 4).

Most geographers today acknowledge that while *place* can be best understood as a concept, *space* is a physical manifestation of just that—of physical locations (Orvell and Meikle 111). The reality of space is objective and material, while place is often mediated by visual representations (Orvell and Meikle 111). Furthermore, according to Orvell and Meikle, place “refers to a complex assemblage of human perceptions and associations only imprecisely or imaginatively related to a corresponding physical *space*” (111). Thus, place can partially be seen as a socially imagined understanding of a specific space. Individuals’ perceptions of place are often highly personal and, “can be socially communicated only through representations, whether verbal or visual” (111). Only through these mediated representations of place can people conceptualize and understand the physical spaces that they inhabit (111). Furthermore, every place is unique: “Place is an ‘articulation’ of” a “specific mix in social space-time. Nowhere can have precisely the same characteristics, the same combination of social processes” (Massey, Jess 222). In my research I push this a step further to also see how these perceptions and imagined conceptualizations of certain types of place, which may in fact not be unique, affect and impact the physical *space*, not only individually, but more significantly on a collective level.

There are other ways to view these concepts as well. Many theorists such as Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine echo the ideas of Henri Lefebvre when they explain space as
‘made up’ through a three-way dialectic between perceived, conceived and lived space…Here, place emerges as a particular form of space, one that is created through acts of naming as well as the distinctive activities and imaginings associated with particular social spaces. For many geographers, place thus represents a distinctive (and more-or-less bounded) type of space that is defined by (and constructed in terms of) the lived experiences of people. (5)

Here, the authors highlight the physicality of *space* and the individuality of *place*. All three of my neighborhoods of analysis are both in a way spaces *and* places. They are physical spaces that exist concretely but also places because they are “defined by (and constructed in terms of)” the lived experiences of the people who live in Milwaukee, Chicago, and North Minneapolis respectively (Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine 5). Further, they are places because people’s images and understandings of these spaces are partially socially imagined. For the purpose of my research, I focus on *space* as concrete physicality and *place* as a separate construct, but one that is still attached to space because it is a representation of it.

This discussion of space vs. place brings me to another point that is vital to establish in order to begin an analysis of my sites. As I began to insinuate above, space is not merely materials and the frame around it; it is also alive in just as many ways as the people who inhabit it (Brady 5). Doreen Massey argues that one can accurately conceptualize space as “social relations stretched out” (Brady 112). Massey and geographer Pat Jess clarify in their text *A Place in the World?* that “social space consists of all of the networks and complexities of social interaction and interconnection, whether these be very small-scale or just global in their reach…” (54). An acceptance of space as a social production is vital to understanding the construction of *place* as unique and ‘specific mixes,’ located in the greater realm of space (Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine
It is the sociality of *space* that creates and allows for conceptualizations of *place* because any understanding of place incorporates concepts of social space.

But *why* is space social? How does it become like this? Through his groundbreaking theory of the Socio-Spatial Dialectic, Edward Soja provides answers to these questions. Soja differentiates between “space per se” (“contextual space”) and “socially based spatiality” or “the created space” of social organization and production (Soja, "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic" 209). He argues that *contextual space* is, “an inappropriate and misleading foundation upon which to analyze the concrete and subjective meaning of human spatiality” because the “organization, use, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience” (Soja, "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic" 209, 210). Thus one must differentiate between physical space itself as a concrete presence and the ways that humans use this space. Soja calls this space “socially produced” and argues that it could be compared with other social constructions “resulting from the transformation of given conditions inherent in life-on-earth, in much the same way that human history represents a social transformation of time and temporality” ("The Socio-Spatial Dialectic" 210). He also references Lefebvre to explain this in a different way. Lefebvre understands this concept in terms of “Nature” and “Second Nature” ("The Socio-Spatial Dialectic" 210). While ‘Nature’ is just that-nature, untouched and pure, ‘Second Nature’ is “…the transformed and socially concretized space arising from the application of human labor” ("The Socio-Spatial Dialectic" 210). Again, acknowledging that *space* is social facilitates an understanding of the concept of *place* as “created through acts of naming as well as the distinctive
activities and imaginings associated with particular social spaces” (Hubbard, Kitchin, Valentine 5).

Soja continues to argue that one push deeper when confronted with the term “spatial” (210). One should not only immediately connect this to something physical and completely removed from any social context (210). One should think of it as a “structure created by society” rather than just society’s container (210). He unequivocally states that all organized space must be seen as, “rooted in a social origin and filled with social meaning” (210). If space is created by society, then that implies that it is produced. However, as Lefebvre clearly states, “Space is never produced in the sense that a kilogram of sugar or a yard of cloth is produced” (85). Rather, “It is people themselves who make places…” (Massey, Jess 134). Geographer Timothy Davis summarized the ideas of the famous French scholar Michel Certeau in terms of how people produce space in his chapter “Designed Space vs. Social Space: Intention and Appropriation in an American Urban Park.” He explains that “the activities of ordinary people” and their “fleeting actions and everyday routines gave form and meaning to the built environment” (ctd. in Davis 340). He continues, “…the uses people make of the built environment constitute significant forms of social and spatial production in their own right” (Davis 340). After all, “culture not only takes place, but makes place” (Hubbard, Kitchin, Valentine 7).

However, people should not be the only ones to get credit in the dynamic relationship between space and social actors. As Mary P. Brady argues, “Far more than material object, a “real” largely distinct from the discursive, “space…is an intimate
participant in sociality” (6). In fact, she labels space as “performative and participatory” (6). Anthropologist Deborah Pellow further defines this relationship as a partnership: “People socially produce their spatial environment, their places, thus, it is a full partner in their social life” (Pellow 60). People as primary agents create and use the space and structures around them but also “each of these built places, then, is an agent that connects one person or group of persons to another. They are mediators in that they also carry messages of fame, genealogy, occupation, and so on” (Pellow 61). Thus space has an intimate relationship with those that inhabit it: “Space is social morphology; it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism” (Lefebvre 94).

If space and those that inhabit it are so intimately linked, then it is no wonder that so many scholars highlight the role of space in identity formation. Massey and Jess argue, “the meanings given to a place may be so strong that they become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them” (88). Thus, a conversation surrounding identity and place requires a conversation also about the meaning of place. Pellow argues that the socially produced nature of space intimately ties elements that spur identity formation to the people that inhabit it: “Relations are embodied in things, and things (objects or artifacts) become active in relation to people. As the built environment is socially produced, it is an exemplar of material culture. Social values, roles, and behaviors are embedded in this spatial environment, and the two-dimensional system facilitates life in the city for the residents” (Pellow 60). Thus, just as humans produce space, space also heavily influences the identities of humans. In fact, Batuman argues that “any form of identity, as a sense of the self, imagines itself in spatial terms” (262). Brady identifies identity as subject formation, meaning the choices people make and how they
conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world (8). Although the process of space production may be hidden or visible, it has a huge effect on subject formation: “Interactions with space are not merely schematic but also highly affective: places are felt and experienced, and the processes producing space therefore also shape feelings and experiences” (Brady 8).

It is important to note that the sense of identity that is often tied to space is not completely individual: “Although senses of place may be very personal, they are not entirely the result of one individual’s feelings and meanings; rather, such feelings and meanings are shaped in large part by the social, cultural and economic circumstances in which individuals find themselves…” (Massey, Jess 89). Neighborhoods especially are important sources of identity, both for residents of the specific neighborhood and for those that do not identify as living in the area (Logan, Molotch 107). Not only do neighborhoods tell people how spaces are physically divided but also they give, often unspoken signals, of social demarcations as well (Logan, Molotch 107). Logan and Molotch explain how these demarcations are sometimes utilized: “In the United States, people use place names to identify the general social standing of themselves and others. To do this people must have a sense of neighborhood boundaries and the connotations of names of other areas” (107). And as Pellow acknowledges, “The real significance of boundaries is how they are perceived” (70). Boundaries are only significant because of the meaning people give them. Furthermore, because of the history in this country of residential segregation that often created this boundaries and therefore social demarcations in the first place, the identities of places that are produced by the collective social actions and representations of groups is not always done in circumstances that the
people chose themselves (Massey, Jessey 134). Thus the relationship between space in the formation of identity and identity in the production of space is very connected to historical residential patterns and the historical meanings that were and often still are assigned to certain spaces.

As I highlighted above, space is socially produced and therefore intimately connected to the humans that inhabit it. A study of space must involve its residents and any study of residents of an area would not be complete without an examination of how they are connected to their area because both are innate in the production of each other. The production of space is linked to both the identities of individuals and the collective identities of the groups inhabiting a space but this relationship does not always happen by choice. I have already identified three sites of analysis: the La Perla restaurant on the South Side of Milwaukee, the Chinatown Gate in Chicago’s Chinatown and the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis” from North Minneapolis. Hilda Kuper defines a site as a “particular piece of social space” when it is a place “‘socially and ideologically demarcated and separated from other places’” (qtd. in Pellow 60). She argues that this social space “‘becomes a symbol within the total and complex system of communication in the total social universe. Social relations are articulated through particular sites, associated with different messages and ranges of communication…The importance of these sites is not only their manifest and distinctive appearance, but their qualifying and latent meaning” (qtd. in Pellow 60). Thus, in order to fruitfully explore the relationship between the abstract and the concrete in the larger realm of space, particular sites must be examined.
Redefining Collective and Socially imagined neighborhoods

So now it has been established that space is social and it must always be examined through a lens that acknowledges this. However, as I highlighted in the introduction and identified as a key part of my research, space exists as more than just the physical. As I define it, there are also socially-imagined and collective understandings of space. Lefebvre calls this “Representational Space” and defines it as, “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols… it overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (39). However at times this representational space is not close to the physical space at all and may simply be a mediated representation of a combination of symbols and associated images that may or may not reflect some semblance of the original physical space or a culmination of many physical spaces. This representational space may be experienced by people who have never had any physical contact with the space itself and therefore the representational space could become more real to them than concrete space. As I also alluded to in the introduction, although imaginary, these conceptualizations can have profound impacts: “Representational spaces…need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness. Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history- in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people” (41).

This imaginary also, however, has a social existence and therefore a “specific and powerful ‘reality’” (Lefebvre 251). What Lefebvre refers to as the ‘mental’ and I name socially imagined and collective conceptions of places and spaces, is “‘realized’ in a
chain of ‘social’ activities because, in the temple, in the city, in monuments and palaces, the imaginary is transformed into the real” (251). Referencing back to my differentiation between space and place, Lefebvre continues to describe a situation in which an individual is asked whether a temple and its surrounding area are real or imaginary. Lefebvre concludes, “…the realist will naturally see only stones, whereas the metaphysician will see a place consecrated in the name of divinity” (251). The physicality of the space are the stones, but the social function and unique location (place) is a place of worship.

A final point to consider: vital to the understanding of all of the spaces and places I have chosen for my analysis is a realization of how the phenomenon of migration, which is a process of globalization, impacts ideas of place. When people lay claims to land, or are forcefully placed on land, and may (or may not) grieve for the location they came from, “they construct and re-construct” the meaning of place” (Massey, Jess 2). Thus, they imagine geography by “producing images and creating identities which then form the bases both of the future character of those pieces of space and of the behaviour of people towards them…” (Massey, Jess 2,3). This is extremely noteworthy to my sites of analysis due to the nature of their individual formations. As of 2005, “…one in five Americans is either an immigrant or the child of immigrants” (García 181) and Chinatowns, Latino Barrios, and Black Urban Spaces in particular were all formed by series of combinations of forced and voluntary migrations. Furthermore, the geographical location of the Midwest and its unique historical and cultural nature as a region landlocked in the middle of the country but as the agricultural backbone of the nation, further contextualizes the role of migration in the formation of my three neighborhoods.
of analysis. Many scholars, among them economic geographers in particular, attribute migration to uneven development, or the idea that different places develop at an increased rate while others develop more slowly or not at all due to unjust economic and cultural factors (Massey, Jess 22). In fact, Edward Soja argues that the historical survival of capitalism itself has depended on, “the differentiation of occupied space into “overdeveloped” and “underdeveloped” regions” (Socio-Spatial Dialectic 220). Capitalism does this as a means for its own survival because as a mode of production it needs to actively create, intensify, and seek to maintain, “regional or, more broadly, spatial inequalities” (Socio-Spatial Dialectic 221). This is tied to migration because uneven geographical development is often one of the main factors for why a person or groups of people must leave a place. Who may leave and enter certain spaces is a matter of restrictions and rights, which can all be connected back to questions of power (Massey, Jess 4). Thus, due to the fact that all three of my neighborhoods of analysis have been shaped by generations of migration, and therefore, uneven development, any study of these spaces must take questions of power and control into consideration. Inherent in a discussion of power is an acknowledgment of the idea that people’s placement in space is never random and is always fraught with meaning. Pellow argues that, “The distribution of people, their location in space, is never socially neutral- it is always related to their political/social position. And I would add that not only do they have socio-spatial positions and practices as a consequence of their relationships to social and spatial environment but they create that social and spatial environment and thus produce their socio-spatial positions and practices as well” (Pellow 70). Thus, the space that people
inhabit is never by chance and therefore provides a rich site of analysis due to its many layers of meaning.

With the exception of indigenous and native peoples, nearly everyone is a migrant or has a family history that is shaped by combinations of forced and voluntary migration, because that is the reality of our globalized world, and especially in the United States. "...the immigrant experience has always been vital to the mythology of America” (Tsui 7). However, I would argue that we are taught to see the migration of some groups more than of others or perhaps we are taught to forget or cover-up the migration of some over time. Furthermore, the migrations of some groups are valued in different ways that the migrations of other groups. For example, as Dávila highlights in her book *Latino Spin*, unlike immigrants from Europe, “Latinos are brown and black” (15). The experiences of conquest and colonization with the U.S. empire “color” them in a very distinct way. Thus, Dávila highlights the importance of distinguishing between “regular migrants” and “colonial migrants,” or “colonial/racial subjects of the empire” (15). Thus, one can “more accurately account for immigrants’ different experiences of incorporation into the United States” (15). The fact that different experiences exist should not be surprising, because as Jess and Massey argue, “The relations which construct uneven development compose the sets of forces within which spatial meanings are produced” (4). Just as power is a factor in who occupies what space, it is also a factor in how that space is understood. Thus, throughout my research, although I use a defined trope of socially imagined and collective understandings of my three neighborhoods, I want to ensure that the possible processes that went into the formation of these understandings remains transparent and
continuously questioned. I also want to highlight the importance of looking at more than one perspective of an understanding of a certain place.

For many obvious reasons, key among them Doreen Massey’s concept of space-time, the historical formations and present-day realities of all of my three neighborhoods of analysis are profoundly different. Massey’s concept of space-time illustrates the idea that space and time are inseparable because the spatial is vital to the production of history, just as the temporal is necessary to geography (ctd. in Hubbard, Kitchin, and Valentine 221). Therefore, because of the different time periods in the formation of my neighborhoods, they must be understood as vastly different spaces. Naturally, it goes without saying that they are also countless other factors, including their locations in completely different cities and the cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds of the people who inhabit these places, that make these neighborhoods vastly different. Yet, for the sake of comparing and contrasting, it is vital to note the common geographical and cultural phenomena that have contributed to their formations and vital for centering a conversation around power and space and how that impacts the consumption of these places. It is also important to highlight again here that my choice of three cities in the Upper Midwest was very intentional and this is partially where I center my intervention with this work. Not only did I choose to study this geographic region because it is often overlooked and not valued as a site of worthwhile research, but also because all three communities of color were formed partially out of combinations of forced and voluntary migrations to escape discrimination and other difficult social factors in other regions of the U.S. and world. These then can also be read as sites of resistance and potential political change. For these reasons, it is pertinent to study how these neighborhoods are
viewed in the social imagination of the U.S. and how this impacts how visitors and community residents interact with the space.

Establishing a Framework for Site analysis: Insider and Outsider Representations and Portrayals of Space

“It is necessary to demystify spatial relations in much the same way Marx demystified the commodity form, to reveal the social relations which lie beneath their ideological blanket” (Soja, *The Socio-Spatial Dialectic* 224).

As previously established, I examine three tropes of neighborhoods (Latin@ Barrio, Chinatown and Black Urban Space) and then three physical examples of these tropes: The South Side of Milwaukee, Chinatown in Chicago, and North Minneapolis. More specifically I will analyze a defined site within each neighborhood: the La Perla restaurant in Milwaukee, the Chinatown gate in Chicago, and the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis” from Minneapolis.

The framework I use to examine each of these sites in a more profound way beyond the spatial analysis framework highlighted in the methods section of the introduction will be divided between insider and outsider portrayals/representations of these spaces. I find this dual analysis vital because, as Pérez illustrates, the meanings given to socially constructed spaces, “…are produced both internally (by the people who inhabit particular environments, their social relations, and distinctive spatial practices) and externally, by media portraits, government officials, and the existence of boundaries which define inclusion and exclusion” (42). This shows the importance of looking at inside and outside portrayals of spaces in order to understand perceptions and representations because meanings are not only produced or disseminated on one side.
They are both created and then spread by different and numerous means. Furthermore, as stated above, I find an examination of both insider and outsider perspectives vital to bringing a constant examination to factors of power and control that impact how spaces and places are perceived and understood.

Determining insiders and outsiders to a space is complicated by who defines them. For example, should an insider to a space be defined by the subject itself or by how greater society perceives the subject? What if this converges from how other members of the space would define the subject? Hubbard, Kitchin, and Valentine claim that there is no outside that can explain the inside because, “place is not a location whose character can be explained through reference to wider spatial processes” (10). They claim that instead, this perspective of greater processes can explain place and space as always in the state of becoming within an inevitable structure of power relations (10). Thus, defining insiders and outsiders to a space is extremely complicated because the place that is in question itself cannot often not be defined within the context of larger space as a whole. For example, as I will discuss in length in Chapter two, the owners of the La Perla restaurant on the South Side of Milwaukee present a challenge in terms of defining insiders and outsiders to a space. While they identify as being community members of the South Side and have invested great amounts of time and money into the space, greater society might not validate their owning of a Mexican restaurant because they are white (Tarnoff).

However, this can be a dangerous and messy judgment call, and in general people’s identities are often too complex to be reduced to a mere “in-or-out dichotomy”
(Heldke 106). Besides, it should not be my roll, nor do I have the authority to determine who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider,” especially because I always occupy the space of an outsider. It would not be realistic to use one, uniform framework to analyze my sites due to the specific dynamics of each case study. I chose to customize my definition of insiders and outsiders depending on the site and its specific power relations and the bodies involved. While one uniform framework cannot be applied to every site and these definitions must be problematized, I took the sustained physical presence in the defined space as an indicator of being an insider to the space into consideration. I also considered how subjects self identified. Defining outsiders to a space was also not without its nuances. Again, I have no right to define who does and does not belong to this category, and do not think that one framework fits my three very different sites of analysis. In considering outsiders to my sites of analysis, I searched for people who do not take ownership (literally or figuratively) in the site and who are coming from outside the site, into the site. As I have already acknowledged, I must also be constantly aware that I am an outsider to all of these sites. I must continuously examine, as Kevin Hannam addresses, the “…assumptions and preconceptions that are being made during the research and their possible impacts on the results” and keep my steps at all times transparent (qtd. in Shurmer-Smith 192-193).

In regards to La Perla, I use the restaurant owners as the insider perspective to the site as because they construct and market themselves in this way, which I discuss further in Chapter two. I consider the outsider perspective to be the patrons who come visit the restaurant. In terms of Chinatown, I consider the insider perspective to be that of the inhabitants of the neighborhood, which includes the gate itself. I consider the outsider
perspective as tourists visiting the neighborhood. Finally, regarding the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis,” I consider the insider perspective to be the artists and YMCA staff that produced the music video, while the outsider perspective to be the viewers of the video.

**Can Space be Eaten?: bell hooks’ “Eating the Other”**

The essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” part of hooks’ 1992 book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, illustrates key elements of the commodification and consumption of Otherness. hooks cites Stuart and Elizabeth Ewens’ definition of consumption as a dominant social relationship that goes beyond just physically purchasing something (ctd. in hooks 33, 34). I also draw from the definition of consumption used by Kosaku Yoshino as consumption being an experience that does not only involve exchanging money for tangible objects but also involves “receiving meaning” (Yoshino 2). Yoshino continues to cite Colin Campbell who writes that consumption is an interaction that often involves pleasure and desire not because of the purchase of actual goods but in the “imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, real consumption being largely a resultant of this mentalistic hedonism” (qtd. in Yoshino 2). In terms of the term commodification, I reference Davydd Greenwood’s essay on the commodification of a local festival in the Basque region of Spain for echoing Marx’s claim that “anything sold assumes a commodity form, including culture” (qtd. in Shepard 187). In this thesis I particularly examine instances in which parts of people’s identities are commodified and consumed. hooks describes the potential impacts of this situation, “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals,
can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (hooks 23). Finally, it is important to note that hooks defines the Other as “marginalized groups… who have been ignored, rendered invisible” (hooks 26).

By using the metaphor of food, she outlines the ways in which “mainstream white culture” is a bland dish that uses ethnicity to liven itself up with spice (hooks 21). The focus is not meant to be maintained on the spice, but rather to, “enhance the blank landscape of whiteness” (29). Thus despite an initial distancing from whiteness, after the encounter it can be returned to even more intently (29). Desire for the other is embedded in structures of white supremacy because an encounter, “does not require that one relinquish forever one’s mainstream positionality” (23). Power relations are reaffirmed because the desiring white individual can enter and leave the encounter changed only in the way that they choose; they may see themselves afterwards as somehow transformed or more “worldly.” An open desire for the Other is often used to claim an affirmation of cultural plurality or progressiveness. This contact, framed within the pretext of having no intent to dominate, appeases the guilt of the past through which one can deny any sense of historical connection or accountability (25). In addition to a denial of any historical connection, there is a denial of the history and voice of the Other (31). hooks calls this denial ‘decontextualization’ and argues that it also displaces the other (hooks 31).

hooks defines encounters with the Other as being seen as, “more exciting, more intense, and more threatening” (26). Thus, there is an enticing mixture of pleasure and danger, which provides the mainstream with the possibility of interrupting their mundane,
regular lifestyles. The Other should provide the opportunity to make the consumer feel more alive and be renewed both sensually and spiritually (26). In this way it is believed that it may be possible to move beyond whiteness and transgress certain boundaries to form “new and alternative relations” (36). However boundaries should always remain intact. The Other only remains exciting if it is still the Other, and thus should not be brought too close to the mainstream.

On the other hand, hooks also cautions that this seduction of Otherness can also be taken up by “the Other” personally (26). She explains that just as white supremacy hyper-focuses on Otherness, “Concurrently, marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation” (26). Furthermore, hooks identifies that often as a reaction to white cultural appropriation and consumption, there can at times be a self-essentialization within communities of color. She labels this as “a fantasy of Otherness” that can potentially reduce, “protest to spectacle” and stimulate, “even greater longing for the “primitive”” (33). Thus, she argues, the otherized culture itself can participate in “meaningless commodification,” which replaces communities of resistance with communities of consumption (33). hooks identifies the potential danger in certain aspects of a culture being readily offered up for consumption; it becomes easier for outsiders to ignore the power of potentially powerful political messages that do exist in other forms of cultural expressions coming from within this same community (34). For example, as hooks explains, even rap that is “overtly political and radical is rarely linked to an oppositional political culture” because rap as a genre also so often, “exploits stereotypes and essentialist notions of blackness” (34).
Although hooks uses specifically the emergence of Black Nationalism to illustrate the point of a community of color practicing self-essentialization, it is vital for the purpose of this work to extend this analysis to other communities of color. Thus I also examine if the sites themselves, all of which were created by historically marginalized peoples, offer themselves up for consumption and how this impacts the overall dynamics of consumption of the space. I argued above based off of hooks’ essay that for spaces to be consumed, they also have to be desired. But the element of a space being made desirable also must be explored. Brady argues that there is spatiality of desire and that inherently the social production of space involves both notions of desire and desirability (83). I do not assign this as something that happens with purely insiders, because as I discuss above and will continue to discuss in chapter two, although for the purpose of analysis the owners of La Perla are being considered insiders to the space, they do not come from a community of color and their claiming of membership on the South Side needs to be problematized.

The question then becomes how this essay, analyzing the consumption of human beings by other human beings, can be applied to a different relationship, namely that of a human being and a building, or a human being and a dining experience within a cultural site. How are my sites of analysis symbolically and physically consumed by those who interact with them? Lefebvre argues that space has in fact taken on, due to the “present mode of production,” a reality of its own, similar to “those assumed in the same global process by commodities, money and capital” (26). Later on in the same text Lefebvre refers to the consumption (“in both the economic and literal senses of the word”) of cities such as Florence or Venice as, “a major spatial contradiction of modernity” (122). Thus if
space operates in much the same way as commodities and entire cities that can be consumed, in what ways can individual neighborhoods also be consumed in a similar fashion?

In order to determine this, I came up with a series of questions to structure my analysis of the dynamics of consumption by insiders and outsiders of the three sites. My intention is not to cover every single question in the framework, but rather to use the framework as a starting point and as a bridge between the spatial analysis, cultural texts and the academic research I have carried out in order to demonstrate consumption. The cultural texts that I will analyze vary from site to site, and will include a mixture of news sources, reviews, blogs and my personal observations. The following questions will be applied to the language, visuals, and content of the cultural texts and to the spatial analyses I carry out:

1. In what ways are dominance or power expressed in terms of the space and perhaps used as a justification for consumption?
2. How is ethnicity portrayed as a “spice” to liven up white mainstream culture?
3. How does the consumption of the site displace the Other and, through decontextualization, deny the significance of its history?
4. Do insiders of the space play into the “Fantasy of Otherness,” as identified in bell hooks’ essay? Is this in any way essentializing?
5. How does the consumption turn a potential community of resistance into a community of consumption?
My frameworks of analysis are in no way meant to be a value critique. I am not insinuating that La Perla should necessarily be a community of resistance just because it serves Mexican food, which is a food tradition from a community of color. I am not implying that if the kids in the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis” do not make an overtly political statement, that they are somehow missing an opportunity for potential political change for the entire Black community. Such claims would be highly problematic and largely ineffective. Furthermore, the frameworks are not meant to maintain a firm white vs. brown/black dichotomy. Many of my sites of analysis are consumed by brown bodies as well as white bodies, and every shade in between. In my framework I intended to adopt similar language to that of hooks’ article in order to be able to use her framework of analysis. This language is not meant to deny the significance or existence of other hierarchies of power or to erase other communities of people that do not fit into the language of purely white on brown/black consumption. Thus, I fully recognize that the frameworks are not perfect or completely inclusive. Rather, the frameworks serve merely as an entry point to attempt to explore some of the questions that bell hooks’ raises in her essay, and thus to focus on the intersection of the abstract and the physical, through the analysis of the three neighborhoods I chose. There are no definitive answers and there are no “rights” and “wrongs.” Rather, having a concrete framework to enter the analysis of my three sites will provide a uniform way to attempt to interpret three very different cultural contexts.

As I have mentioned above, an analysis of the consumption of the three sites is necessary to the overall goals of my research because in this way, a deeper understanding will be reached of how socially imagined and collective concepts of the tropes of the
Latin@ Barrio, Chinatown, and Black urban spaces impact physical examples of these tropes. By carrying out qualitative textual analyses of insider and outsider representations of the three specific sites, I unpack the spaces for cultural meaning and gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the abstract and concrete. Due to the social nature of space and the role that people play in its production, an examination of direct contact between people and a given space is necessary to truly examine in what ways popular tropes interact with physical space. Because interactions between visitors (which in this work I define as outsiders) and communities of color often involve consumption that draws from socially imagined concepts of neighborhoods, an examination of this relationship is a way to zoom-in on the contact point between the abstract and the concrete. Ultimately this leads me to address my final research question of if this process is cyclical and not only does the abstract affect the concrete, but the concrete also cycles back to impact the abstract. I argue that all three sites do in many ways continue socially imagined concepts of their distinct neighborhoods but they also all disrupt these understandings in some ways.
Chapter 2

The Latin@ Barrio and the South Side of Milwaukee: Hot, Spicy, and Authentic?

“The restaurant itself is both theater and performance. It serves and helps create the symbolic economy” (Valle, Torres 71).

Socially Imagined and Collective Understandings of the Latin@ Barrio

If the claim is true that people in cities orient themselves by constructing an imagined city-a cognitive map, then what would the section labeled “Latin@ Barrio” look like (Kevin Lynch qtd. in Cinar and Bender xii)? Many scholars argue that ‘el barrio’ is simultaneously “space, place, and metaphor, with deep cultural, material, and symbolic meanings for artists, activists, policy makers, and scholars” (Pérez, Guridy, Burgos 6). At the same time, anthropologist Arlene M. Dávila argues that Latinos as a group are also “at once both living and socially imagined” (Pérez, Guridy, Burgos 2).

Thus, there is a wealth of information surrounding ‘the barrio’ and its inhabitants as both socially imagined and concrete concepts.

The term Barrio means ‘neighborhood’ in Spanish, with different connotations depending on the geographical origins of the type of Spanish being spoken (i.e. Mexican Spanish, Argentinean Spanish, etc.). In an English-speaking, American sociology and popular culture context, the word ‘barrio’ is often used as a synonym for ‘ghetto’
("Barrio"). However for many Latinos in this country and especially in literary contexts, the term ‘barrio’ has positive connotations as “a geographic space as well as the cultural and spiritual matrix of Latino life in the United States. For a neighborhood to be called a “barrio” means that it has a history and permanence and that Latinos were born or grew up there, relating to it as the locus of family and culture” (“Barrio”). Since the 1960’s, the barrio has reached an “almost mythic stature” as a cultural center to maintain Latino and Hispanic identities within the U.S. national culture that often pressures otherized groups to “acculturate and conform” (“Barrio”). Although it is often taken for granted that “the authentic and true culture” resides in the home country of origin, the barrio stands as a different place of origin and identity and as “a piece of turf and incubator of bilingualism, biculturalism, and a sense of belonging to the United States without having to give up one's language or ethnicity” (“Barrio”).

However I would argue that this is not a mainstream understanding of the barrio, as the term ‘barrio’ is often used as a synonym for ‘ghetto’ (“Barrio”). The shared history of “racism, segregation, poverty, social marginalization, and the struggle over urban space” combined with the forgetting of these processes and structural conditions have caused Barrios as well as ghettos to be seen as “naturalized,” “geographical entities” and “permanent fixtures of American cities” (Diego Vigil and Lilia Fernández qtd. in Pérez, Guridy, Burgos 4, 234). Forms of residential discrimination such as redlining “often reinforce the marginalized imagery associated with such racialized urban spaces as barrios or ghettos,” thus creating stigmatized spaces (Valle, Torres 144). Portrayals of Latinos in the national media often construct them as “problem people who either commit or suffer crime” (Valle, Torres 57). Valle and Torres argue that Latino poverty and
criminality “are constructed in two distinct, but mutually reinforcing, dramatic spaces-the inner city and the border zone, both of which are identified with the depredations of poverty” (Valle, Torres 57).

Roger Rouse argues that a borderland does not only exist within the two sides of a state-constructed international border, “but that it may also exist in cities where migrants settle and continue to weave relations with their hometowns” (qtd. in Cinar and Bender 21). Perceived divisions among neighborhoods become national boundaries, as border policies built on beliefs in “typologies of inclusion and exclusion and other schizoid dyads of colonialism: citizen and alien, “legal” and “illegal,” white and “of color,” developed and underdeveloped, first world and third world, and civilization and barbarism” become increasingly normalized as “those living in these neighborhood republics are represented as objects of police and INS surveillance an control- while white middle-class Anglos are objects of police protection” (Camilla Fojas qtd. in Cinar and Bender 37). The construction of Latino immigrants as border crossers inanti-immigration initiatives and news reports equate the status of being Latino with being a threat (Valle, Torres, 57). They are seen as a threat to economic stability, Anglo, middle-class women, and jobs (Valle, Torres 57). This “racialized hysteria” connects these “illegals” with “intractable criminality” and otherized, underdeveloped civilizations (Valle, Torres 57).

Racial identity must also be more closely examined within this constructed space of the inner city Latino Barrio and the border zone. Valle and Torres argue that neither the U.S. as a nation state nor Los Angeles (which is the geographical focus of their book
Latino Metropolis) have created a “public language with which to conceptualize the mestizos in our midst” (Valle, Torres 56). They posit that Latinos as a group cannot be “strictly categorized as a race, a nationality, or an ethnic group” because Latinos are a mixed (or mestizo) people, who are “genetically woven from indigenous, African, Iberian, and European as well as Asian strands” (Valle, Torres 56). Any attempt to even begin to engage with Latino identity must first acknowledge that they are multiple and overlapping and must also consider “culture, language, and history, in addition to race and class” (Valle, Torres 56). These scholars further argue that Latino hybritiy and the complicity of Latino identity is largely ignored or “constructed in threatening terms” in the inner city and the border zone (57). This lack of understanding, along with “preconceived notions of what constitutes a Latino “barrio,” has severely limited the potential of forming linkages “within and outside of the Latino political landscape” (Valle, Torres 42).

By naming the large-scale patterns and associations that are commonly connected to the Latino Barrio, my intent is not to disguise, as Upton warns against, “their relationship to particular social groups and individual actors” (175). My intention is not to make blanket statements about all Latino Barrios and say therefore the Southside of Milwaukee is like this, but rather to draw attention to the collective and socially imagined trope of Latino Barrios and put it into conversation with the South Side of Milwaukee.

The South Side of Milwaukee

Although people often orient themselves in cities with imaginary maps in their heads, the second component to this is that often, Kevin Lynch argues that these maps
deviate, “in meaningful ways from the cartographer’s map, with it solidity and boundedness” (ctd. in Cinar and Bender xii). So putting this imaginary map aside for the moment, let us now examine the existing and real South Side of Milwaukee.

Mexicans have been in the Milwaukee area since at least the late 1880’s, but it wasn’t until the 1920’s that large numbers began moving to the city to work in tanneries, factories, fields, foundries and railroads (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 7). Many were recruited from the Southwestern Mexican state of Michoacán as replacement workers (Rodriguez “Latinos in Milwaukee” 5). ‘Los Primeros,’ as the new arrivals were commonly referred to in Spanish, settled mostly in the city’s South Side (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 7). They revived many neighborhoods that were originally settled by primarily Polish and Polish Americans after they began to move out to the suburbs (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 7). The larger the community grew, the more entrepreneurs realized they had a fabulous opportunity to make business ventures in an area where there were many people yearning for a connection to the country they had left behind (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 31). Thus, the South Side became a hub for Latino owned restaurants, bars, grocery stores and bakeries. At first these businesses served Latino clientele for the most part, but eventually the rest of Milwaukee began to patronize these businesses as well, which greatly contributed to the financial success of the businesses (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 31). The famous church Our Lady of Guadalupe was also established in the 1920’s on the South Side along with other cultural institutions and events, which demonstrated how the South Side was also a stronghold of Latino culture (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 5). Although the South Side was originally and continues to be predominantly Mexican and Mexican American, there is
also a significant Puerto Rican, South American and Central American presence (Rodriguez, Filzen, Et al, 6).

I consider the study of the South Side of Milwaukee to be very important because it is not a commonly explored topic. The scholars Pablo Mitchell and Haley Pollack conducted an extensive study of the Latino community in the small Ohio city of Lorain. They noted the importance of studying the Latino community in an often forgotten space by saying, “In examining overlooked locations like Lorain, Ohio, scholars can begin to fill in gaps in the history of Latinos in the United States, expanding past major urban centers and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands” (qtd. in Pérez, Guridy, and Burgos 150). Similarly, I consider Milwaukee a city that is often overlooked. People often express surprise when they find out that it has such a large and vibrant Latino community despite the fact that it is not anywhere near the border with Mexico and it is only the 28th largest city in the nation. But if cities like Milwaukee are not given a closer look, than we risk missing out on drawing important connections among Latino communities throughout the country and challenging commonly held misconceptions. The Latino population in Milwaukee continues to grow despite population losses in the city among other ethnic and racial groups (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 7). There needs to be more attention paid to this increasingly vital part of Milwaukee’s community. As the Latino population nationwide also continues to rise, this conversation becomes increasingly important.
Specificities of identification

The use of labels used to describe this geographical area requires clarification. Due to the long and diverse history of ethnic communities and residential segregation of the area that is geographically located in the South Side of Milwaukee, I would argue that the social imagination surrounding the area has changed several times over the years and is still very divided. In fact, a long time Milwaukee resident, in response to being asked what he thinks of when he hears “The South Side,” said that he immediately almost divides it in his head between the Latino South Side, which he called “The Near South Side” and the “Far South Side,” which he described as being inhabited mostly by city employees trying to live as close to the suburban limits as possible and “red necks.” This is only the perspective of one person but it highlights the point that it is difficult to define what exactly is meant by the South Side because it is a term that means different things to different people. My research focuses on the Latino community of the South Side of Milwaukee, which according to census data and all of the scholarly sources that I have read, is predominantly concentrated in a smaller geographic area that some refer to as the Near South Side. However this terminology deserves some discussion because many of the sources that I used for academic background and my cultural sites of analysis refer to the Latino community as more broadly inhabiting “the South Side” of Milwaukee. This is complicated however because many of the census tracts that officially make up the South Side of Milwaukee, such as Bayview and Holler Park, are predominantly white and, therefore are attached to a very different social imagining. I chose to use the label “the South Side” throughout the presentation of my research to refer to the geographical location that I am focusing on, not because I think it is necessarily the most accurate or
because everyone would agree with this label, but because it is most inclusive to the large range of sources that I highlight in the presentation of my research and it calls attention to the ambiguity that can often exist in attempting to label certain geographic areas.

The Milwaukee scholar Joseph A. Rodriguez, who has written extensively about the Latino community in Milwaukee, identifies the South Side as a very clearly marked Latino space. He commented, "...the south side is visually identified as the Latino community, and aptly, South Sixteenth Street was renamed César E. Chávez Drive in honor of the labor leader who inspired activists beginning in the 1960s" (2006 Rodriguez 7). He attributes this visual identification to the bustling Latino business district on the South Side, particularly in the shopping areas of the abovementioned drive, National Avenue and Mitchell Street (2006 Rodriguez 7). Geographically speaking, he defined the area as: “bounded by the Menomonee River, Lake Michigan, Lincoln Avenue and 27th Street” (Rodriguez, Filzen, Et al, 5).

Interestingly, this geographical definition matches up very closely with the definition from the City of Milwaukee government, but instead of using the broader term “The South Side,” they refer to this area as the “Near South Side” ("City of Milwaukee, WI"). According to the City of Milwaukee government website, the Department of City Development defines the South Side as being divided into the Near South Side, Southeast and Southwest ("City of Milwaukee, WI"). They describe the Near South Side in the following way: “…a culturally diverse area and the heart of the Hispanic community in Milwaukee. This vibrant area is dominated by urban residential areas bisected by commercial corridors with many small family-owned retail shops and ethnic restaurants.
The area has numerous community and religious institutions that add to its fabric” (“City of Milwaukee, WI”). The boundaries that mark the Near South Side from the other two geographic sections of the overall South Side area and other defined sections to the North, as demarcated by the city government, follow demographic patterns from the 2010 U.S. Census showing that while this area is predominantly Latino, all of the other sections surrounding it are predominantly white or more racially mixed (Bloch, Carter, McClean). The city itself identifies the area as predominantly “Hispanic” so they do not attempt to disguise this but it is interesting to ponder why this particular section was delegated as separate from the other two parts of the greater South Side. Is it because it is predominantly Latino so in their minds it made sense for them to label it differently? Or did this geographic division make sense because of the established nature of how census-tracts divide areas and because of the history of residential segregation in this country, it therefore is majority Latino? Another organization, the Southside Organizing Committee, defines the Near South Side in a similar geographic fashion as the city government. It describes their activities and motives in the following way on their website:

SOC serves the 88,000 residents living between the Menomonee Valley and Oklahoma Avenue from South 1st Street to the West Milwaukee border. This area is the most densely populated neighborhood and has the largest concentration of non-English speaking residents in the State of Wisconsin. It is also one of the only areas in the City of Milwaukee experiencing population growth.

The area that the SOC defines as the Near South Side is nearly identical to that of the city government but interestingly, they do not define the area as predominantly Latino but do acknowledge that there are a large number of speakers of languages besides English.
When I emailed the organization further inquiring about their definition of the South Side, they acknowledged that they do not define the South Side as the area found purely within their designated boundaries and that their name may have been a poor choice because people living on 13th and Oklahoma or 67th and Howard (the Far South Side) most likely consider themselves part of the South Side. They further acknowledged that they would also consider these people as part of the South Side, but they do not serve those areas.

The Wisconsin Historical Society also reports that Milwaukee’s Spanish-speaking population is predominantly concentrated on “Milwaukee’s near south side” ("The Latin Community on Milwaukee's Near South Side") in an area that is still known as Walker’s Point, which is where La Perla is located. Interestingly, they conveniently overlook the history of residential segregation in Milwaukee as well by sugar coating why it perhaps is predominantly Latino: “[The Near South Side is]…the only remaining place that retained the sense of ethnic “urban villages” that had characterized Milwaukee in the 19th century” (“The Latin Community on Milwaukee’s Near South Side”). This is problematic because as Lilia Fernández addresses, “…structural racism, labor stratification, and residential segregation” among other factors contributed to the creation of primarily Latino barrios (qtd. in Pérez, Guridy, Burgos 234). However, as displayed on the Wisconsin Historical Society’s website, this fact is often overlooked as Fernández argues: “But in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such spatial formations have been reified and understood perhaps too simplistically as the logical and inevitable result of ethnic congregation” (qtd.in Pérez, Guridy, Burgos 234).
Approaching it from a different angle, the Library website of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, in which there is an extensive data base about Milwaukee neighborhoods, states that the South Side of Milwaukee contains eleven smaller census tracts (“South Side”). Of course what the government considers official census tracts does not necessarily correspond with what residents identify as their conceptualizations of neighborhoods. They interestingly make no distinction between a Near South Side and the rest of the South Side but rather divide the South Side into eleven smaller neighborhoods, which have names that, according to the Southside Organizing Committee, are not even used by most residents. They however also shared in their email to me that there are several groups within the Near South Side that would like to work towards creating a stronger sense of identity for some of those areas.

This diverse array of definitions of the South Side of Milwaukee highlights the need to further examine the labels given to certain geographic areas. However, despite the plethora of definitions I presented, I want to stress that for the purpose of the presentation of my research I use the label ‘the South Side of Milwaukee.’ But I also want to address very pointedly that the vast majority of Milwaukee’s Latino population is concentrated on what many refer to as the “Near South Side of Milwaukee” and that my site of analysis, La Perla, is located in this geographic area.

“La Perla: Your Mexican Restaurant”

La Perla is located on the intersection of S. 5th Street and National Ave., which according to Joseph A. Rodriguez, is part of the historical and present day Latino business district (Rodriguez, “Latinos in Milwaukee” 7). According to the maps on the
University of Wisconsin Milwaukee’s Library website and many reviews of the restaurant, La Perla is located in a neighborhood called Walker’s Point (“South Side”).

The restaurant was opened in 1995 by co-owners JoAnne and Nick Anton, who had never served Mexican cuisine in a restaurant-setting prior to opening La Perla (“You don’t have to be Mexican to dish up authentic Mexican cuisine”). It is open seven days a week for lunch and dinner, has two main indoor dining rooms on the first floor with a bar with an extensive collection of tequila bottles in one dining room, a roof-top patio, and a private party room. One of its most noticeable and prominent features is a giant, red, mechanical chili pepper that guests can ride, much like a mechanical bull. The walls of the inside dining rooms are painted in bright colors and there are several other large sculptures of chilies adorning the walls.

La Perla is a fascinating example of a complicated mix between interior and exterior space. The restaurant blends conventional understandings of public and private because the public is pulled inside and there is an exchange of money as well as social interaction here: "In conventional terms, "inside or (interior space)" is the site of the intimate and the personal, the private and the inalienable, whereas "outside (or exterior) space" is the realm of money, exchange, and public social interaction" (Martin J. Murray in Prakash and Kruse, 164). La Perla also intentionally plays with perceptions of this blend in the way it presents itself. They have a sign hanging outside of the restaurant, directing patrons where to enter, that reads, “START HERE: Best Mexican Cuisine, Best Margaritas, Friendliest Staff, & Best Friends, Most Fun! La Perla” (see Figure 1).
This description of the restaurant shows a desire to create a comfortable, intimate space, where one can spend time with friends and be treated well by staff. However, it is also firmly established that it is a business and therefore also more of a public space because the wares that are for sale are mentioned and made to be apart of the relationship that the patron will enter into. Patrons will have the “Most fun” because they are entering into both an intimate sphere and a place where they can consume within a business relationship. The significance of this to my overall research is that I constantly need to keep in mind this delicate balance between public and private space in order to carry out a deeper analysis of how the space is possibly consumed and/or offered up for consumption.

**Insiders Representations and Perceptions: Restaurant Owners and the Consumption of La Perla**

The restaurant places itself at the center of the South Side by having a sign in the shape of a heart hanging from the corner of the building that reads, “The Heart of Milwaukee’s Latin Quarter.” To begin with, it is noteworthy because it shows how the...
restaurant sees itself located firmly in the center of the part of the city that is statistically majority Latino. But the word choice is noteworthy. The word “Latin” is the same word used in “Latin American,” which is referred to in this way because Romance languages derived from Latin are primarily spoken there, but in my opinion it is less common than “Hispanic” or “Latino” in 21st century vocabulary when used to describe a community of people with origins from Latin America. Thus I find the use of it very interesting. I had never heard the South Side being called “The Latin Quarter” until I read the sign outside of La Perla. I have also never heard anyone else refer to the South Side in this way. From a simple google search, the only pages that turned up when I typed in “Milwaukee Latin Quarter” were pages that had to do with restaurants on the South Side such as La Perla.

According to a 2006 article from *The Business Journal*, the idea of a Latin Quarter, that would “highlight restaurants, bars and shops” and “attract new businesses to the near south side neighborhood” was pushed for by “business leaders in Milwaukee’s Hispanic community” (McCormick-Jennings). Interestingly, they published several quotes from JoAnne Anton, the co-owner of La Perla, who does not identify as Latina. They do not clarify if they place her in the category of a business leader in “Milwaukee’s Hispanic community” because she owns a Mexican restaurant on the South Side or for other reasons. The article further explains that the new business district would also attract “non-Hispanic” restaurants for, “…people who want American fare such as burgers and fries” (McCormick-Jennings). Is the author of the article therefore insinuating that all of the other restaurants then are therefore not American? Although the business district would be centered around just that- businesses, they would also attempt to give people an opportunity to learn about Latino culture and honor the history of the area by displaying,
“…a statue representing Hispanic heritage, flags “from Hispanic countries or a flower bed” (McCormick-Jennings). The proposed boundaries were planned to run, “…from the southern end of the Sixth Street bridge on the north of Mitchell Street on the South First Street on the east to South Sixth Street on the west” (sic) (McCormick-Jennings).

Interestingly, these borders demarcate a much smaller area (from a sight estimate I would say about 10%) of the area that the city of Milwaukee and many city organizations designated as the Near South Side or the South Side. The proposed ‘Latin Quarter’ is comprised of two census tracts which according to 2010 census data were 58 and 76% Latino (“Mapping the U.S. Census”). The area borders the 3rd Ward, a district that has seen many changes in the last 10-20 years from a mostly warehouse district to an area full of stores, restaurants, bars and trendy condos. The article explained that ‘Hispanic’ leaders looked to the 3rd Ward as an example of how the Latin Quarter could also be successful (McCormick-Jennings). The co-owner of La Perla also expressed that calling the district ‘The Latin Quarter’ would, “…brand our area and show the Midwest and the rest of the country what our city is about” (McCormick-Jennings).

The city government announced in 2005 that it would back a Latin Quarter but as of the publication of the article, no plans had officially been approved (McCormick-Jennings). I could find no further sources that showed that the city had officially approved the plan for this proposed district but several restaurants in the area, including La Perla, as I have discussed, use this name to describe their location on their websites and in other advertisements. In fact, in a 2012 article on onmilwaukee.com, Anton was quoted as saying that her favorite advertisement for the restaurant is the heart shaped sign out front that reads ‘Heart of the Latin Quarter’ because there is, “Nothing wrong with
having this added identity and helping bring even more people down to our area” (Brevväxling).

I think it is important to consider why this choice of labeling may have been made and how it invites a very specific type of consumption of the space. What are the different connotations of the words “Hispanic” or “Latino” as compared to “Latin”? By definition, they can all mean different things, depending on the source. While according to some sources Hispanic refers to an individual of Spanish descent, Latino refers to someone of Latin American descent. However the definition on the U.S. census defines Latino and Hispanic as the same: ““Hispanic or Latino” refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (“Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin:2010”). In general, both terms are heavily used but also very contested and ‘Latino’ is a more political choice. As established, I use the term “Latin@” for this work. As I mentioned above, the word ‘Latin’ on its own is, in my opinion, noticeably less common as an adjective. In most online dictionaries I checked, no reference was even made to Latin America until the fourth definition; demonstrating that is more associated with the Romance languages of Europe than Latin America itself. If the business owners really wanted to celebrate the “Hispanic” heritage of the area, why would they not have called it the ‘Hispanic Quarter’ or the ‘Latino Quarter’? Is it perhaps due to disagreement over which term to use? Or is it for other reasons? What connotations do the words ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ hold? According to scholars Pérez, Guridy, and Burgos, “…dominant political and popular discourses about Latinas/os offer up foreboding images of threat, invasion, and contamination…” (Pérez, Guridy, Burgos 2). Did the business leaders of the area perhaps
want to be associated with images of the 3rd Ward and the famous Latin Quarter of Paris instead to invoke more cosmopolitan and hip associations? In Chapter One I discussed the connection between space and identity and how the production of both are related to each other. By Anton expressing, as I quoted above, that by calling the area ‘the Latin Quarter’ she was adding a different sense of identity to the space, she invites a specific type of consumption. She not only claims the land herself by naming it (Pérez 59) and claiming the right to be able to place whatever identity she chooses on it, but she also wants others to claim the land in very specific ways. In her scholarly article "The Other “Real World”: Gentrification and the Social Construction of Place in Chicago," Pérez discusses “linguistic conflicts” over place names, specifically about calling a part of Chicago West Town or Wicker Park (47). She raises the important question of how titles and labels change perceptions of spaces by demonstrating that people perceived the neighborhood differently depending on what name was used to refer to it. Anton’s goal is obviously to have more customers come because she is a business owner and she also expresses that by saying that the added identity “would bring even more people down to our area” (Brevväxling).

Thus, I argue that the very specific word choice of the ‘Latin Quarter’ as opposed to the ‘Latino Quarter’ or ‘Hispanic Quarter’ is designed to promote a type of consumption that is viewed as less threatening and more welcoming to potential guests. This label is used to invite outsiders to the space to consume the space. Anton was not the only supporter of this label and based off my readings of news articles, most likely did not even come up with it herself so I am not trying to somehow incriminate her for supporting it. Rather, I attempt to explore her support of it and what the possible
implications of this are. Her use of this label further demonstrates how the Antons construct themselves as insiders to the space, which demonstrates their attempt to claim it for their own means.

On the restaurant’s website and in its menu, the food is described as "authentic Mexican dishes in the style of Guadalajara, Mexico" ("About La Perla") (see Figure 2).

Figure 2, First page of La Perla menu, Milwaukee, WI
Photo taken by author

This prompts the question of how to define “authentic” and what this claim means to how the space is consumed and offered up for consumption. Some scholars, such as author Torben Huus Larsen, argue that there no longer exists an “authentic”: “In a postmodern world where one would be hard put to identify an authentic environment and where displacement seems to be the norm, it is of little importance if the artifact is
removed from its original location since it is essentially up to the tourist to reconstruct its meaning anyway” (qtd. in Orvell and Meikle, 93). Thus Larsen would argue that La Perla’s claim of authenticity is meaningless because the product that it offers, Mexican food, is displaced from its “authentic environment” and its meaning is therefore constructed by others. But I argue that this claim is not meaningless and must be unpacked because most restaurant patrons will not read Larsen’s opinion before opening up La Perla’s menu and will take the claim seriously.

It is interesting to ponder if one questions the authenticity of the restaurant more because the owners do not self-identify as Mexican or Mexican American. Would one automatically assume that the food were authentic if they did identify as such? In her study of “ethnic cookbooks,” philosopher Lisa M. Heldke dives into the question of authenticity and the heritage of the author. I would pose the same questions in terms of the background of restaurant owners that she does when people assume that the authors who share the ethnic heritage of the cookbook they wrote automatically wrote an “authentic” text. She contends that this assumption ignores questions of, “whether the individual knows very much about cookery in general, or the cooking of her own culture in particular” (108).

This is also a complicated notion because although the food is the restaurant and the restaurant is the food, as owner Joanne Anton is quoted as saying in an article published by OnMilwaukee.com (Tarnoff), I would argue that both have different presentations and stand on their own. Can one be “authentic” and not the other? And by whose standards? When reviewing a Mayan themed restaurant in Middleburg Heights,
Ohio, critic Elaine T. Cicora stated that she was not bothered by the fact that the decorations of the restaurant did not appear to be very accurate to her knowledge of Mayan history and culture ("Your Place or Mayan?"). On the contrary, she stated, “this is entertainment, not Ethnology 101, and authenticity isn't a requirement” ("Your Place or Mayan?"). I raise this example not because of the connection between Mayan culture and Mexico. This quote would have been interesting no matter the theme of the restaurant that Cicora reviewed. The noteworthy aspect of her comment is the claim that authenticity need not be considered when the matter at hand is not an academic subject. Also important to ponder is her easy acceptance of the word authenticity. She uses it throughout her review without one attempt to define what it means. According to Cicora, in restaurants, the only important aspect is entertainment ("Your Place or Mayan?"). Later on in the review, instead of critiquing the lack of supposed authenticity, she praises the restaurant for not having further stepped over the line by putting wait staff in loin cloths or dart guns ("Your Place or Mayan?"). Although she makes all of these points tongue-in-cheek, the impact is still the same- apparently it is completely acceptable to play with ideas of authenticity in restaurants- in fact, it should be expected.

Progressing the link between notions of authenticity and relationships to a cultural practice such as food, Heldke would complicate the labeling of La Perla’s restaurant owners as insiders beyond how I have already done this because she would probably categorize them instead as “Insider-Outsiders” because they have, “lived in another culture for so long that their understanding of their home culture is deeply mediated by the culture in which they now live” (111). Or in the case of La Perla co-owner Nick Anton, he identifies his home culture as Mexican, although he does not have Mexican
heritage. In an interview with the magazine “On Milwaukee” in May 2012, he explained that, “I thought I was Mexican until I was 6,” because he grew up in a neighborhood in which he learned Spanish and Greek before he learned English. His wife and co-owner JoAnne Anton was quoted as saying on the decision making process that went into opening La Perla, “Mexican food as been assimilated into our culture, and we had very defined familiarity, so it didn’t feel like we were doing anything different” ("You Don't Have to Be Mexican to Dish up Authentic Mexican Cuisine"). Her husband added in the same interview, “And we’ve always loved Mexican culture.”

Continuing her discussion of “ethnic” cookbooks, Heldke brings up the topic of admiration and love for the other or, “the people and things one possesses and uses” (132). Heldke does not find it surprising that cooks love the cuisines that they write about in their books just as it does not surprise me that the Antons love Mexican food and culture (132). Based off of their comments, it appears that the Antons see food as constituting an “ethnic borderland” and that therefore in certain ways the boundaries between there culture and Mexican culture are permeable or fluid (Ruiz 5). Some scholars, such as Donna R. Gabaccia, argue that food brings people together and demonstrate “peaceful cultural interaction” (qtd. in Ruiz 5,6). Christine Yano firmly pushes back against this: “Eating another social group’s food does not mean that one possesses particular knowledge or appreciation of their culture, fraternizes with them, or supports their political or economic positions” (qtd. in Ruiz 6). If eating a food that is from outside someone’s social group doesn’t, can cooking it or teaching others to cook it legitimize this relationship? Heldke challenges us to see this relationship between cookbook authors and the cuisine they write about as more than just touching: “the loving
ways that they write about those cuisines can perpetuate a hierarchical and marginalizing relationship between themselves and this other culture” (132). Similarly, I argue that the Antons’ expressive appreciation for Mexican food, without a self-critical examination of what the implications of a white couple claiming Mexican food as a part of their culture, is both problematic and invites consumption of the space by outsiders in a way that could also be problematic. They use Mexican cuisine as a raw material to turn into cultural capital and use its power to enhance their own statuses as restaurant owners (Heldke 52). 3

So how do I make this site truly speak for itself? What are insider portrayals of this space, not mediated by other agents? To tackle this question I carried out a cultural analysis of two elements of La Perla: its advertisements and the presentation of the restaurant. Although advertisements are mediated by human agents and that must be acknowledged, as it is difficult to determine exactly who created the advertisement and for what purpose, I choose to examine them as stand-alone cultural texts that represent the restaurant and are rich with material to be read by themselves. By presentation of the restaurant I mean the manner in which the restaurant is physically presented as well as virtually presented on the website.

Advertisements and Presentation of the Restaurant

The Chile Pepper

La Perla plays with images of fire, hotness and heat to establish the mood of the restaurant. Their website is “www.laperlahot.com” and their menu is decorated with images of flames. Hotness, represented by its signature red chili pepper, is the theme of
La Perla. The restaurant is a themed space that uses the theme of the chili pepper and heat to “establish a unifying and often immutable idea throughout its space” (Lukas 2) (See Figure 3).

Figure 3, Large Pepper in La Perla, Milwaukee, WI
Photo taken by author

Scott A. Lukus argues that many people purely enjoy the forms of entertainment within themed venues, but “the primary purpose of these spaces is not to fulfill human needs but to play on human desires” (2,3). In fact, he further argues that “theming is a projection of desire- the need to control imagination through recognizable illusions” (5). The chili pepper and other images of hotness are recognizable because they are prominently displayed throughout the restaurant as well as on the website and are also a part of the common fantasy of what Mexican cuisine should be. Theming is sometimes understood as just a static phenomenon, “as a combination of architecture, interior design, signage,
and associate forms of performance that relate to the common theme.” The author instead argues that theming has a lived and flexible nature because the five senses are utilized in the maintenance of themed environments (Lukas 17). The theme of La Perla is only effective because the customers also participate in it.

Further connecting to the discussion of the complexity of the intimate vs. public nature of the space and the sign outside of the restaurant (see Figure 1), Lukas argues that a themed space can make a customer feel part of something larger than them, which can be seen as a larger form of belonging (Lukas 12). La Perla’s marketing is brilliant because by mentioning that the space is a place for friends to come and have fun and associating this with the theme of the pepper (see Figure 1), it makes the customer feel like they are something larger than them- they are entering the La Perla family, while simultaneously further normalizing the image of the pepper.

Not only are there large peppers adorning the walls and ceiling of the restaurant as I mentioned earlier, but there is also a mechanical pepper that patrons can ride.

Figure 4, Mechanical Chile Pepper, Milwaukee, WI
Photo taken by author
There is even a “Live Pepper Cam” that can be accessed on La Perla’s website so that at all times of the day and night interested individuals can see who is currently riding the chili, making this theming even more hypervisible. The image of a hot, fiery chili pepper or hot tamale references a “female stereotype of the Latin “hot tamale,” or half-breed harlot” that has “conveyed the image of a lusty, hot-tempered, sexually promiscuous, racially-mixed, and therefore degraded mestiza subject” since the early days of Hollywood (Valle, Torres 68). Interestingly, the image of actually riding a large chili pepper is laced with double meaning. In Mexican Spanish, ‘montar al chile’ (ride the chili) and ‘subirse al chile’ (get on the chili) have sexual connotations meaning roughly to have intercourse with someone.

Rather than speculate about the owner’s intentions behind the mechanical pepper, I will focus on what it represents and its impact. “Food must be understood within circulations of power” (Slocum 303) and because this is a piece of food on a giant, blown-up scale that can actually be mounted, there is much to examine here. This chili pepper cannot be consumed in the sense that it can be eaten, but as a prominent symbol of the restaurant, the riding of it represents consumption of the space. Because the mechanical pepper displays such a prominent part in the identity of La Perla, as it is displayed in the large picture window in the dining room with a view of the street and figures into many of its advertisements, and is connected to stereotypical images of lust, hotness and promiscuity as related to a degraded Latina woman, the restaurant invites a consumption of the space that is facilitated by the fantasy of imagery that a Mexican restaurant is supposed to provide. This is highly problematic because the consumer is told
two messages that can lead to a dangerous conclusion. Consumers are told that this is authentic Mexican food and they are fed the image (and presence) of the mechanical pepper. The conclusion that some may have is that this is Mexican culture; this mechanical chili is authentic, too. This both normalizes “the commercial and aesthetic appropriation of Mexican culture” and leads to false understandings of what Mexican culture is (Valle, Torres 96). Thus, La Perla plays into the “the Fantasy of Otherness” to a large extent and essentializes Mexican culture by using the dual rhetoric of “authentic cuisine” and the less than serious image of a mechanical chile pepper.

There is no denying that chile peppers are important foods in Mexican cuisine so La Perla is not being completely misleading by using it in their theming (Pilcher 163). However, Historian Jeffrey M. Pilcher provides an analysis of the chile in his book ¡Que vivan los Tamales that further complicates La Perla’s use of it. Throughout Mexico’s history of encounters with colonial powers, the spiciness of chiles stood as a reason for why invaders wanted to avoid this ingredient in their own cooking (Pilcher 65). Thus, “the love of chiles had become a significant distinction between Mexicans and foreigners and thus formed part of the national identity” (Pilcher 65). In fact there is a popular Mexican refrain that goes, “Yo soy como el chile verde, picante pero sabroso” which translates to, “I am like the green chile, hot but tasty” (Pilcher 163). Due to the existence of a chile pepper as a national symbol of Mexico, the act of mounting and riding it can be seen as offering an even more sexualized and offensive form of consumption, that asserts dominance and control.
Further problematic is that the way the image of chile peppers is used in La Perla’s presentation uproots “Mexican culture from its cultural and societal contexts” (Valle, Torres 68). By riding a mechanical pepper, there is no acknowledgement of the role of chiles in Mexican history as a form of resistance against foreign cuisines throughout centuries and centuries of colonial occupation (Pilcher 66). Pilcher argues that, “The unique flavor that Mexicans imparted to their foods served as one way of forming a distinctive national identity” (65). There is only a superficial connection of the chile with Mexican national identity in that it is the theme of this Mexican restaurant but there is no real examination of the historical, cultural and societal contexts of the chile. This lack of context is not surprising. As Heldke expresses, restaurants know that diners expect good food and quick: “We are not terribly interested in doing the work of coming to understand another cuisine; what we want is a quick fix meal that will give us an authentic relationship to an authentic tradition immediately-without any mundane laborious effort” (Heldke 28). Furthermore, the theme of the chile pepper doesn’t have to have depth in order to be effective. Shelton Waldrep argues that theming only needs to “convey the “imagined essence” of a place or period” and this must be vague enough to “manipulate memories and conjure up associations, but need not have specific referentiality (qtd. in Lukas 118). La Perla conjures up images of heat and sexuality to accomplish this. But as La Perla always does, through its description in the menu and its advertisements, it still has to make some claim at authenticity to remain credible.
The People in the Space

During one of my visits, I could not help but notice that the waitstaff was entirely Latino while the customer base was almost entirely white. Of course, this is my reading of the identities of people and I did not approach every individual and ask how they self-identify. This was particularly interesting considering that both of the owners are white. Neither of the restaurant owners were present during my January visit. I am not sure how often the owners are usually there. However based on my few visits, I observed that La Perla relies upon a division of labor that scholars Valle and Torres identify as common in culinary spaces that practice “cultural cannibalism” (92). The very survival of its multicultural cuisine relies on trapping “Latino immigrant workers in the role of brute physical laborers” (Valle, Torres 92). I mention this not to fall in the trap of claiming that a restaurant can only be seen as “authentic” if all of the diners share the same cultural heritage as the food. I will address this point below. Rather, I think it highlights the dual and paradoxical nature of mainstream America’s relationship with Mexican cuisine. It is simultaneously accepted and desired, while also continuing to subjugate the Latino workforce to certain sectors of the labor market.

Further complicating this notion, Mexican cuisine is another example in a long list of commodified “ethnic” foods that come from nations that the United States dominates politically and economically (Heldke 52). She does not find it surprising that they come to the United States in the first place or are commonly relegated to the restaurant industry, “It is no coincidence that these cuisines are available to us in the United States. Citizens of many countries come to the United States to escape repressive,
exploitive conditions in their own country- conditions sometimes created or exacerbated by U.S. government policies and corporate practices. Once they arrive here, the restaurant business may be one of the few economic opportunities open to them” (52).

This is not meant as a critique of La Perla or its owner for employing and supporting the individuals that it does. It simply brings up an interesting point in Mexican restaurants in the U.S. that I think is commonly overlooked. It is too simple to remain blissfully ignorant of these economic and cultural factors that shape the formation of the group of people who brings them their food and water, not to mention, “the historical and cultural conditions that surrounded the development of their cuisine” (Heldke 52). After all, why would one notice these things when they can ride a mechanical chili pepper instead?

The last point I will address in the discussion of insider representations of La Perla is the way the name of the restaurant is advertised on La Perla’s website. Right under the name “La Perla” on the main page, with an image of a red pepper in the background, is the slogan “Your Mexican Restaurant” (*La Perla: Your Mexican Restaurant*). The use of the word “your” invites a claim to the space on the part of the customers and encourages consumption. This rhetoric also plays into their continuous theming of constructing a welcoming, warm place for friends but I argue also shows an invitation to consume the space in a way that references power dynamics. By implying that this space can be theirs just by simply entering the space, they are communicating that the customer can take ownership of this consumption of Mexican food on their own terms. Especially given that the primary patrons are white, this further reinforces the
bloody colonial history between Mexicans and white Europeans. This claiming also completely disregards the historical, societal, and cultural context of Mexican cuisine and facilitates a superficial and simple relationship between the customer and the food.

**Outsider Representations and Perceptions: Patrons and the Consumption of La Perla**

The other half of the relationship of the consumption of the space are the outsiders to La Perla, who I define as patrons visiting the restaurant. To examine outsider representations and perceptions of La Perla I carried out a cultural analysis of several restaurant reviews, blogs and articles about the restaurant. The purpose was to examine how patrons of the space demonstrate consumption.

The idea that the level of authenticity corresponds with the backgrounds of the customer base is a common claim that I found in restaurant reviews of La Perla and other Milwaukee restaurants. This idea even showed up in the seventh episode of the fourth season of the show *Friends*: “The One where Chandler Crosses a Line.” One of the main characters, Rachel, asks another main character, Monica, if she would like to eat in an Italian restaurant with her. She says she knows it’s good because she saw a lot of Chinese people there. Monica shows confusion and then Rachel explains, “Remember you said some restaurant must be really good because you saw all these Chinese people eating in there?” (“The One Where Chandler Crosses a Line (Uncut Version)).” Then Monica finally understands and explains to her that that was because it was a *Chinese* restaurant.

Not surprisingly, in a study on “ethnic” dining from The National Restaurant Association, results showed that many respondents replied, “I like to go to restaurants where natives of that cuisine eat” (Heldke 24).  

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The fact that the majority of La Perla’s customer base is white was seen as an indication to some customers that the food is not authentic. For example, in one review from a website for vegans, one person commented, “La Perla is a fun place to eat but isn't the place to go for super authentic Mexican food. The food is good but over the years, it's definitely evolved into the Mexican place where white people eat” ("La Perla." | Milwaukee, Wisconsin| VegGuide.Org). Another reviewer named ‘Legaldiva’, on the city search review site for the Milwaukee area, slammed La Perla by saying, “Someone hijacked the adjective "Mexican" and applied it to this food. This is not mexican food. If you want mexican food, try "Azteca" or "Botanas," but don't expect to get anything mexican from La Perla. This joint mostly caters to the suburban crowds too fearful of the South Side to venture very far from what the television tells them is mexican cuisine” (sic).

It is important to not only recognize that this exists, but also ponder why the notion of the customer base reflecting the cultural heritage of the cuisine making the place more authentic might be so common. Also, should this be seen as something negative? Is it truly problematic to think that a restaurant must be good if people who grew up with this food heritage find it appealing? Heldke attributes this phenomenon to people entering restaurants wanting and desiring to experience something different (43). She continues saying that, "If we do not get enough of “it”- or if what we get out of it strikes us as not being the genuine article, a real, authentic, capital-D Difference- then we leave disappointed, even angry, vowing never to come back” (43). If everyone in a restaurant looks like the diner who is entering, they might not consider the experience different enough and thus will not consider it “authentic.” Of course, it is impossible to
know how the reviewers self-identify. Maybe they are not white or suburban so my theory of them not wanting to be like the other diners could be invalid. But the fact remains that both reviewers associate authenticity in a dichotomy of us and them. No matter the identity of the reviewers, in their minds, La Perla cannot be authentic because it is too similar to the mainstream— to white people, to suburbanites. Thus authenticity is associated with the city and the absence of whiteness. Based on numbers, there are more Mexicans in urban areas, but does this dichotomy automatically define authenticity?

So perhaps the problematic of this phenomenon can be seen as two-fold. First, there is the risk of making the same assumption that I just did above— one can never tell how another individual self-identifies. Even if a person reads another individual as Latino and even if they may be Latino, that does not mean they are necessarily Mexican and grew up with the cultural heritage of Mexican food if they are eating in a Mexican restaurant. Secondly, the assumption that a restaurant must be good because of the presence of an ethnic Other goes back to the great potential that exists to participate in exoticization and food colonization through the consumption of “ethnic food.” Just as it is problematic to one seek a different, thrilling and exciting experience by consuming a different cuisine without consciousness of the impact of this, it is problematic to expect others to validate or negate ones perceived authenticity of a place, purely based on assumptions about their identity.

This rhetoric surrounding the rejection of the consumption of La Perla, because of its supposed lack of authenticity, shows that La Perla does not meet the reviewers socially imagined expectations of what an authentic Mexican restaurant should be. In
their social imagination of Mexican food, white people and suburbanites do not belong and their presence automatically voids authenticity. However I also found just as many if not more reviews that claimed La Perla’s food was very authentic (further showing the complicated nature of this word). One diner, who calls himself ‘Sparkomatic,’ wrote a review about La Perla in 2012 on the website Tripadvisor entitled “Fine Dining at Fair Prices.” The first line of the review reads, “La Perla is about as authentic as you can get, with surprising menu items like shrimp bisque.” This demonstrates that the reviewer associates what is unfamiliar as authentic, because as Heldke explains, “What we identify as authentic in that culture is often simply what is new to us- which may or may not represent what insiders to that culture would identify as significant, traditional, or genuine elements of it” (27). She continues to explain that the expectations of the eater truly define what is seen as authentic (Heldke 27). This review demonstrates a very fitting example of this because French Bisque, as obvious from its name, is historically not Mexican cuisine. Yet, because it is an unfamiliar dish to the reviewer, it is automatically seen as authentic.

The article “You don’t have to be Mexican to dish up authentic Mexican cuisine” is also a fascinating example of assigning authenticity (Tarnoff). The article is based on the premise of authenticity because of the title, but as I found in many other restaurant related articles, the author never once defines what he means by this term. Furthermore, the word ‘authentic’ is not mentioned again in the rest of the article. Instead, the author uses other positive descriptions of La Perla. For example, Tarnoff lists La Perla as one of the “more successful” Mexican restaurants in Milwaukee. He also calls it “iconic, approachable, and long-standing.” Thus, although the author only mentions the word
‘authentic’ once (in the title) and never defines what it means, based off of the other descriptions of the Antons and La Perla, the reader is encouraged to connect authenticity to the other terms he uses to describe the restaurant and the Antons: success in the restaurant business, a status of being well-known over a long period of time, and a claimed association with the culture of the cuisine that the restaurant serves. This is a very superficial use of the word authentic because it goes into no discussion of the food itself or the history of Mexican cuisine and instead attaches it to all of the positive qualities he associates with the white restaurant owners. Perhaps most problematic about the article is the question that the author poses, “Was it hard for the restaurants to get the Latino "street cred?" Do Mexicans, for example, dine at La Perla?” (Tarnoff). These questions, which conflate all Latino identities with Mexican cuisine, also qualify the authenticity of the restaurant as coming from the approval of people on the urban street. The use of the term “street-cred” is commonly associated with an urban context and thus positions all of those who could vouch for the authenticity of the restaurant as coming from a vague idea of an urban space.

Heldke connects this search for authenticity by mostly white diners and reviewers with desire; a desire to fill an emptiness or void that was created by lacking an authentic relationship to their own culinary roots. Thus the diner seeks to plant itself on the roots of another cuisine from a different culture that is seen as owning an authenticity that seems “palpably obvious” at first contact (Heldke 28). The interesting part of the case of the Antons and La Perla is that this search for authenticity is committed twice on two different levels. The Antons appropriate Mexican culture in order to construct La Perla as the stage of this claimed ‘authentic’ action while at the same time, patrons search for
authenticity in La Perla in a way that shows a desire that frames ethnicity as a spice to make whiteness more interesting. The authenticity of the restaurant is both seen as being strengthened by the Antons’ social capital as successful business owners, but is also constantly reaffirmed by a search for validation from sources that are seen as truly authentic, i.e., any connection to Mexican culture, or even a more generalized Latino culture.

Many of the reviews and blog posts that I read about Mexican food in Milwaukee display consumption of the site that displaces the Other and, through decontextualization, denies the significance of its history. For example, one contributor to onMilwaukee.com released a blog talking about how Mexican food used to be non-existent in Milwaukee but how now is celebrated and familiar (Jaques). Interestingly, the blog was published almost six years to the date after the large immigration reform marches in 2006, in which the Mexican and Chicano community was heavily involved across the country. There is, however, absolutely no mention of this in the blog post; it is completely disconnected from any greater context.

I also pondered if that would be offensive and stereotypical to write about the marches in the blog post. Why should everything Mexican automatically be associated with immigrant rights? But I think the problem is that in the blog post, there is a celebration of the consumption of Mexican food in a very self-congratulatory way (look at how multicultural we are!) but it does not go deeper than that. There is no examination of why Mexican restaurants came to Milwaukee in the first place. There is no discussion of why most of the Mexican restaurants in Milwaukee are located where they are. There
is no mention of why it might be hard for some Mexicans to stay in the U.S. because of immigration laws or why the U.S. might be a hostile environment for them. Biju Mathew calls this mindset “writing out” (180). Due to the ideology and privilege of the blogger as an older, white male, he can unconsciously write out this entire connection with the immigration reform marches. It isn’t just the blogger who does this, however.

OnMilwaukee.com also does. The blog was published as part of a series of posts for Mexican Dining Week, “Bienvenidos a Mexican Dining Week on onMilwaukee.com. This week, in honor of Cinco de Mayo, we’re spicing things up with daily articles about Mexican restaurants, foods, drinks, sweets and more. Enjoy a week of sizzling stories that will leave you craving Milwaukee’s Latin offerings. Olé!” (Jaques). Nowhere in the entire week of articles honoring Cinco de Mayo, which is ironic in itself because it is not widely celebrated in Mexico, does it mention any political or social issues relating to the Latino community. It is purely about consumption.

Addressing the Cycle: the Perpetuation of Collective and Socially Imagined Concepts of the Latin@ Barrio

Many reviewers of La Perla insinuate that their only interactions with the South Side are through patronizing restaurants located there. Therefore people’s perceptions are mediated inherently by the very material consumption of food. However, the patrons’ experiences at La Perla also involve the consumption of space and place on a level beyond material food, or as Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen define it, also as a social relationship that demonstrates domination (ctd. in hooks 33). If most people’s only encounter with Mexican culture is through La Perla ("Milwaukee Neighborhoods Change
Over Time”), then this experience tells them certain messages about Mexican spaces, such as that spicy, hot and fiery peppers mean authenticity. This is problematic because La Perla is not a Mexican space; it is a place constructed by white people to serve a cuisine that they label and market as “authentic Mexican food” in order to earn a profit.

Heldke describes the problematics of the only relationship with a culture being through food,

…when all I know of a culture is what I learn from inside of a restaurant, I have a very limited picture indeed. Out of this experience, I create a superficial image of a culture, an image that treats that culture as if it were designed for my use and pleasure. This way of eating is harmful both to colonizer and colonized, for it reifies and reduces colonized people, substitutes for authentic relations to food the exotic quick fix and normalized colonialism, encouraging us to condone it in its other, more destructive economic and political forms. (58)

The Antons construct a profit-driven environment in which superficial images of Mexican culture, such as the mechanical chili and unfounded claims of authentic food, are normalized. Thus, they display what bell hooks refers to as ‘the commodification of difference,’ which “enables the voice of the non-white Other to be heard by a larger audience even as it denies the specificity of that voice, or as it recoups it for its own use” (31). Patrons are led to believe that what they experience in La Perla is Mexican culture because the restaurant is located on the South Side and because it claims to be authentic. They construct this authenticity by both attaching themselves to socially imagined concepts of the Latin@ Barrio as well as by claiming concrete space on the South Side through naming it. However, they only achieve this by relabeling concepts of both the South Side and Latin@ Barrio as less threatening and more accessible to outsiders. By trying to attach themselves to parts of the socially imagined concepts of the Latin@
Barrio and by associating themselves to only positive, superficial images of the South Side that have to do with consumption in order to attract a certain audience, they choose what part of the narrative to buy into and only when it financially benefits them. They can escape the negative parts of the narrative because they are white. They perpetuate an image of the Latin@ Barrio as a fun and exciting space to enter into for short periods of times for pleasure but to exit when desired, without any need for contextualization. This also invites a consumption of the space that perpetuates and normalizes white claiming of Mexican culture.

In some ways this can be seen as interrupting parts of the social imagination because the positive images that are used to market La Perla deviate from many negative stereotypes of the Barrio, such as those that portray it as a space of crime and deviance. But these images are purely profit driven and superficial, thus doing more harm than good. They do nothing to attempt to change negative components of the social imagination, but rather appropriate, over hype and essentialize the positive components as well as deny the significance of the greater social context by rewriting other parts, such as the name of the neighborhood.

Those that rejected a consumption of La Perla did so because it did not fit their fantasized version of what an ‘authentic’ Mexican restaurant on the South Side should be because it was full of white people and suburbanites or didn’t have food of the expected standard. Thus, by not living up to some people’s expectations of what this space should be but not clearly defining how it supposedly should be in order to be ‘authentic,’ it still perpetuates the social imagination of Latino Barrios because there is made to be some
held-up standard that La Perla does not live up to. Thus, by not meeting it, it still constructs its existence and contributes to the concept.
Chapter 3

Transnational Chinatowns and Chicago’s Very Own: If Gates Could Speak

Collective and Socially Imagined Concepts of Chinatowns

I will always remember my family’s trip to Chicago’s Chinatown with my sister’s friend and her family from Taiwan when we ate “authentic” Chinese food. The restaurant was in a tucked away, nondescript, two story mall, actually a block away from the familiar gates marking the entrance of Chinatown. In my mind I was confused; the restaurant was not located within the limits of the official Chinatown, yet it appeared to be more “authentic” than any Chinese food I had ever eaten before. My family and I were after all the only white people in the whole restaurant, the menu was completely in Chinese, and there were no forks or knives to be found. So what was the “Chinese” food I had grown up eating my whole life? Were any of the things that I had associated with being Chinese actually Chinese? What did this mean about Chinatown as a space? If some very important spaces in the neighborhoods were located outside of the geographic definitions of the “officially” established Chinatown, then what was the importance of Chinatown? Was this even Chinatown then? Or was it purely my own conception that it was not in Chinatown because it was not within the gate? Chinatowns are commonly seen as representing Chineseness and orientalism, but the question must be posed to whom and for whom? (Mayer 1).
First it must be acknowledged that collective and socially imagined concepts of Chinatown in the U.S. are inherently *transnational* because, “The Chinatown has always been a transnational phenomenon” (Mayer 1). Although naturally every Chinatown differs from other Chinatowns depending on many factors including geography and “societal situatedness” a transnational imaginary and fantasy of Chinatowns as a concept is formed due to “shared political and cultural frameworks of segregation, marginalization, and exoticization” that place Chinatown as a part of “a network of real-life diasporic exchanges” (Mayer 1).

Particularly in an U.S. American context, San Francisco’s Chinatown, about which there exists a large body of scholarship, is often cited as a large influence on the formation of other Chinatowns and in general on the construction of the collective and social imagination of Chinatowns (Mayer 2). This Chinatown’s transition from an isolated ethnic enclave that was “exoticized, yet generally subjected to racist and xenophobic vilification” to a new sort of tourist destination in order to combat exclusion policies and an overall hostile environment was also mirrored in several Chinatowns across the country (6). Although every Chinatown did not experience an earthquake that caused many of these changes as San Francisco did in 1906, strategies of “self-fashioning, marketing, and ethnic transformation” heavily influenced the formation of many Chinatowns (4). However, as Mayer argues, these self-promotion strategies must be seen in connection with “measures of containment, restriction, supervision, and control as they were enacted by state and regional authorities in the past” (4).
According to Yong Chen, Chinatown has gone through four phases of development:

In the first stage, Chinatown was the entry port and incubator of Chinese food, serving an almost exclusively Chinese clientele. In the second, Chinatown became a tourist attraction, and restaurants existed as a central part of its tourism industry. In the third and fourth phases of Chinatown’s history, the emergence of new Chinese communities in the suburbs and postmodern high-tech hubs marks the decentering of the Chinese population. (82)

The Chinese community of greater Chicago has transitioned into the third and fourth phases, but I focus on the Chinatown in Chicago’s city limits, which has remained in the second phase. Important to note is that Chen continuously highlights the role of food in rendering this spaces visible. The scholar notes that food became “a central element of non-Chinese tourists’ ‘Chinatown experience’” (186). In general as a business venture Chinatown also became increasingly diverse: “By the 1940’s, the American Chinatown was firmly established as a business venture in which stakes were held by Chinese, Chinese Americans, and white Americans alike” (Künemann and Mayer 13).

A few other historical events and periods are vital to mention in order to understand the formation of the collective and socially imagined concept of the Chinatown. Kuo Wei Thchen highlights the existence of the standard Victorian “vilification of Chinatown” as a “dark, underground, dangerous place…” (qtd. in Künemann and Mayer 31). Mary Ting Yi Lui argues that the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 along with China’s role as an ally to the U.S. “worked to spark popular American interest in Chinese American life” (qtd. in Künemann and Mayer 84). Mary Ting Yi Lui further proposes that early Cold War narratives further changed
“the once reviled urban Chinatown” into a well-known and important visual icon “in popular and official depictions of America as a multiracial society in the postwar period” (qtd. in Künemann and Mayer 84). Although the image of the Chinatown was reframed as “voluntary” ethnic enclaves “as opposed to racial segregation” in order to fit these postwar narratives, Mary Ting Yi Lui argues that “popular fears of Chinatowns as ethnic ghettos breeding economic poverty or ethnic and racial separatism that could foster political unrest uncomfortably persisted” (qtd. in Künemann and Mayer 98).

Although the social imagination surrounding Chinatown has changed drastically since its beginnings in the 1800’s, many similar negative perceptions still exist. James Chen, the founder of Las Vegas’s Chinatown explains, "'Chinatown' also means negative things...It means filthy, gritty, dirty, produce on the street, people only speak Chinese, isolated, doesn't care about anybody else, or even worse- gangsters, prostitution, that kind of thing'" (qtd. in Tsui 10). Many scholars, such as Yong Chen, also argue that Chinatown continues to stand as a popular symbol of a “physically isolated and culturally exotic ethnic settlement found almost exclusively in the American metropolis” (qtd. in Künemann and Mayer 186). Yong Chen demonstrates that Chinatown stands as imagery for an “embodiment of alien unfamiliarity for non-Chinese outsiders” (qtd. in Künemann and Mayer 186). He continues by showing how this idea also has another side, “For the Chinese, however, Chinatown has always meant their community” (qtd. in Künemann and Mayer 186).
Chinatown in Chicago

Chicago’s Chinatown is smaller than that of New York, but because there are more people living and working in this Chinatown, it holds the title of second largest Chinatown after San Francisco ("Welcome to Chicago Chinatown"). Chinatown is enclosed in about a thirty-block area and is in the South side Armour Square neighborhood (Boerema). In 2012 it had about 400 businesses and around 10,000 residents (Boerema). Unlike other major Chinatowns in the U.S., Chicago’s Chinatown relies almost exclusively on the restaurant industry and is expanding to nearby Bridgeport instead of declining economically and in terms of population (Lan 8). Chicago’s Chinatown has always been an extremely diverse community in terms of class difference, “language, place of birth, place of origin, political affiliation, legal status, and length of residence in the United States” (Lan 9). According to the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, “It [Chicago’s Chinatown] is a community hub for Chinese people in Chicagoland, a business center for Chinese in the Midwest, as well as a popular destination for tourists and locals alike” ("Welcome to Chicago Chinatown").

The first Chinese immigrants came to Chicago to flee racial discrimination in California in the 1870’s and 80’s (Lan 14). Laundries were the main economic activity for Chinese immigrants in Chicago, as in many other Chinatowns across the nation (15). By the 1880’s there was already an established Chinese community in Chicago, just South of downtown (15). However, between 1900 and the 1920’s this original Chinatown was slowly moved to its current day location on Wentworth and Cermak, which is farther South and commonly referred to as Armour Square (15). This area was described as, “a marginal area, comprised of scraps and remainders of land from the surrounding Near
South Side, Bridgeport and Douglas neighborhood” in a local community fact book from the early 1900’s (16). The area was already composed of mostly working-class Swedes, Irish and Germans (16). While many of the groups of European immigrants cycled through the neighborhood, indicating the “upward mobility of ethnic whites in American racial and economic hierarchy,” most of the Chinese Americans remained in the “deteriorating environment of Armour Square,” along with African Americans (21). The departure of these white ethnic groups was almost immediately followed by a large number of post-1965 Chinese immigrants to the area (Lan 23).

Throughout its history, many artificial boundaries have been created between the Chinese American community and greater Chicago, which further “isolated Chinatown from the American mainstream” (Lan 20). Other urban renewal projects have also destroyed important parts of the Chinatown community. For example, “In the early 1960s, construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway demolished Hardin Square Park, the only recreational space in Armour Square…” (20). Also in the 1960’s, the Sun Sing Theater, which played Chinese movies to residents, was torn down in order to construct the Stevenson Expressway (20). No new theater showing Chinese movies has been built since. In addition to being a cultural loss, this also boxed Chinatown in on its southern most border. Because of the expressway, Chinatown could no longer expand to the South and was literally and figuratively cut-off. In 1969, in order to construct an extension of the Dan Ryan Expressway (the Franklin extension project), apartment buildings and houses located on the east side of Wentworth avenue were demolished (20). This project never materialized and after remaining empty for several years, it was turned into a parking lot for people visiting Chinatown (20). Currently Chinatown is “hemmed in by
elevated expressways on the east, west, and south sides” and is only connected to the rest of Chicago by a series of tunnels (Lan 20).

**Specificities of identification**

In terms of labeling and identifying spaces, Chicago’s Chinatown is perhaps the least ambiguous. The name of the neighborhood itself leaves no room for questions; it is a Chinese space within Chicago. Yet, behind this clear label lie necessary questions that the complex realities of any ethnic enclave in America make necessary: is this space truly more of a Chinese American space than Chinese? Who originally labeled the space “Chinatown”? Does that really matter in today’s context if both tourists/visitors and residents identify it in this way?

There is some explanation needed to clarify the exact location of what is known as Chinatown in Chicago. While the original settlement of Chinese immigrants in Chicago was in the North of the city, what is considered current day Chinatown is on the Southside, centered on Cermak and Wentworth Avenues ("Welcome to Chicago Chinatown"). However, the old location of Chinatown on the North side is sometimes referred to as “New Chinatown” because of recent settlements of newer immigrants. It is also sometimes called New Vietnam. The recent commercial development a few blocks North of the Chinatown that I focus on, is also sometimes referred to as “New Chinatown” due to its flurry of relatively recent construction.
The Site of Analysis: The Chinatown gate

The Chinatown gate was dedicated to the area in November of 1975, “with the leadership and fundraising efforts of civic leader George Cheung (Lan 21) (see Figure 5).^4

Figure 5, Chinatown Gate, Chicago, ILL
Taken by author

According to my email correspondences with the Chicago Chinese American Museum, the construction of the gate was financed by local business owners and community people. Peter Fung, a Chinese American architect, designed the gate that is 60-feet wide and 33-feet tall (Lan 21). It is elaborately ornamented with tiles and “symbolized the vitality of the Chinese American community and its determination to remain in the inner city” (21). Anthropologist Shanshan Lan, who carried out an extensive ethnographic study of racial and class identity among Chinese immigrants in Chicago, also described the gate as “landmark architecture” that “contributed to the consummation of the image of Chinatown as a symbol of racial difference” (21).^5
The gate is located at the intersection of Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road, marking the entrance to the street that has the greatest concentration of Chinese restaurants, businesses and organizations in Chicago’s Chinatown. The front of the gate has three lines of text (see Figure 5). The top line, framing the upper-most edge of the gate reads in English, “Chinese Community Center.” The second line, spread out among four tiles suspended by wire in an open gap in the gate reads in Chinese characters “The World is a Commonwealth.” I have read other translations of these characters as meaning roughly “The World is shared by all.” According to a panel mounted on the side of the gate, these words are from an essay in “The Book of Rites,” which was written around the eleventh century by the Duke of Chow. It is said that Confucius was heavily influenced by this essay. The Chinese characters on the gate itself were reproduced to represent the handwriting of Dr. Sun Yet-Sen, the founder of the Republic of China. Also on the side panel is an English translation of this part of “The Book of Rites” done by Mr. Liu Chieh, the Republic of China’s Ambassador to Canada. I quote the beginning of the essay from the plaque (see Figure 6), “When the great principle prevails, the world is a commonwealth in which rulers are selected accordingly to their wisdom and ability. Mutual confidence is promoted and good neighborliness cultivated. Hence men do not regard parents as only their own parents, nor do they treat as children only their own children…”
Finally, on the final line of text, towards the bottom of the upper half of the gate, it reads “Welcome to Chinatown” in English. The letters in all three lines of text are gold, shiny and large enough to read from rather far away.

The back of the gate, the side facing the interior of the business district, utilizes the same design of letters in a three-line formation of text as well. However, all of the characters are in Chinese. The top line, as on the front of the gate, reads, “Chinese Community Center.” The second line has four spread out characters on tiles that read, “propriety, righteousness, honesty (clean fingered) and a sense of shame.” (See Figure 7).
Insider Representations and Perceptions: Neighborhood Residents, the Gate and its Consumption

I identify the residents of Chinatown and the gate itself as insiders to this space. The Chinatown gate, more than my other two sites of analysis, lacks obvious and immediate social actors, because it stands alone, and has since 1975. It is a gate, with no eyes and no mouth. Yet, as Lefebvre argues, space itself can speak, “but it does not tell all” (142). But I argue that the gate still says a lot. Lefebvre argues that, “Space is at once result and cause, product and producer; it is also a stake, the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies, and hence also the object of wagers on the future- wagers which are articulated, if never completely” (142, 143). As an occupier of space in Chinatown, the gate addresses all of these dichotomies in very particular ways. I argue
that the use of both languages on the gate speaks to the dual function of the gate as a symbol of Chinatown to English and Chinese speakers. Furthermore, the gate invites a consumption of the space by signaling \textit{where} to focus the consumption.

The front of the gate has three lines as described: “Chinese Community Center” in English, four Chinese characters that according to the plaque on the side translate to “The World is a Commonwealth” and “Welcome to Chinatown” again in English. As I also mentioned above, the back/inside of the gate displays purely Chinese characters. What fascinates me about this is the message that the words on the gate transmit. By clearly stating “Welcome to Chinatown” on the gate, it identifies itself as an entry point to the street that is therefore defined as Chinatown. It can be driven and walked through because it is an open gateway. The framing of the gate over a two-way street with two sidewalks on either side further invites consumption of the space because it can be entered with cars, as well as pedestrians; it is an easily accessible space. There is no ambiguity about the gate as an invitation to enter the space. What is open to interpretation, however, is the fact that this message is in English on the side of the gate facing the “not yet Chinatown part” and in only Chinese characters on the inside of the gate. To me this sends a message that the outside world coming in is expected to speak and read English, while it is understood that those inside the gate, looking out, will understand Chinese. So in a way, the gate itself determines who are insiders and who are outsiders to the space. The visitor also participates in this construction because they are forced to recognize that they are not part of the community because they cannot read everything on the gate, especially from the inside.
I also highlight that the gate reads in the first line on the front side, in all capitalized letters, “CHINESE COMMUNITY CENTER.” This message is important to unpack. Due to my extensive research on the community on Chinatown, I believe that this label could refer to the Pui Tak Center Building, which is a half block away from the gate and shares a similar architectural style and the exact same color scheme with the gate. When one looks directly through the gate, the intricate tower of the center can be seen above towards the right. This building houses ESL and Chinese language classes along with other community services and is frequently seen as a community center in Chinatown. However this label could also refer to the wish to mark, with the gate, the entrance to the literal center of the Chinese community in Chicago and make this point very obvious to outsiders. Either way, this language symbolizes that attention should be concentrated on the street that the gate frames, because this is, according to the gate’s language, the main part.

Continuing the spatial analysis of the gate and its impact on consumption, I draw attention to the relationship between the gate and its surroundings. I continue to argue that the gate frames and directs the consumption that visitors are invited to partake in and differentiates between insiders and outsiders to the space, but I also posit that the gate does so by attaching itself to socially imagined understandings of Chinatowns. Geographer David Chuenyan Lai argues that the social imagination that surrounds Chinatown causes the viewer to “mold the chaotic images of Chinatown into a perceived coherent precinct” (84). Viewers of Chinatown are distinctly aware of the intervals between different objects such as signs, telephone booths, or street lamps (84). He continues to point out that the close density of these objects immediately draws our
attention to the dense population of Chinatown and the overcrowded streetscape, which he attributes to tapping into the social imagination that surrounds Chinatown (84). As I described earlier, the gate is a frame to the commercial street that is behind it (when one is standing on the side of the gate with English characters). If one returns to Figure 5, one can see the incredible amount of signs and busy store-fronts that surround this entrance to Chinatown. There is no grand spacious entrance; stores surround the two sides of the gate and continue down the street as far as the eye can see. By framing this visual under a sign that reads “Welcome,” the gate labels this density and chaos as Chinatown. However it is also important to consider what businesses are framed within this context. Most of the shops and restaurants on the first block by the gate are aimed at tourists, such as restaurants and shops with small trinkets and souvenirs. The image that tourists most expect and can accessibly consume is the image that the gate frames.

If one flips the perspective to peer through the gate from the other direction, the gate still reads “Welcome” and marks the space as “Chinese Community Center” but peers onto a different scene and as discussed, these characters are in Chinese and not English (See Figure 5). One can see part of the skyline of Chicago, the elevated subway tracks, a four-way street, and more Chinese restaurants. Besides the fact that this shot seems less crowded because it is framed by the faraway skyline and the nearest shops are across the large street, many of the businesses appear to be similar- mostly restaurants with large signs advertising their specials. By saying “Welcome” also on this side of the gate, it reminds people that Chinatown is more than just what is on the busy street of Wentworth Ave. Noteworthy, however, is that it only does so in Chinese. The side that English speakers can understand only directs them under and through the gate, on to Wentworth
Ave. I remember my confusion as a child of being led blocks away from the gate by our Taiwanese friends to their favorite, “authentic” restaurant. The gate almost secretly nods to insiders who can understand the “welcome” on both sides, and see it as a gate that can be crossed in two directions instead of a gate that only leads one way into the crowded Wentworth Ave. Thus it is a symbol of the power of insider knowledge. Most importantly, the gate serves as a boundary. No matter what it represents to whom, it physically breaks up the space and makes a grand statement, signaling that what lies on either side of the gate is different, or meant to be viewed as different depending on the perspective of the person.

Besides the plaque that explains the poem on the gate, there is another plaque on the side of the gate that reads, “This is a copyrighted design which may not be copied or reproduced in any way without the express written consent of Peter Fung © Peter Fung 1975.” Thus the image and idea of the gate is by law owned by the architect who designed it, but I argue he cannot own what the gate represents or the effect it has because it is attached to something larger than just Chicago’s Chinatown. I have already established that the gate marks the entrance to Chinatown, because of the language on the gate itself, but I also argue that the gate marks the entrance because of the social imagination that surrounds Chinatown gates.

The Chinatown gate is linked to Chinatown for more reasons than its physical presence there. Batuman explains that identity and space are connected for reasons beyond their physical coexistence (262). She says the relationship is not merely, “one of territorial identification but one of continuous imagination linked to the social practices
that are rooted in space. That is, not only the practices, but also the social imaginary has a spatial character” (262). The Chinatown gate is connected to the space that is Chinatown because it represents in the social imaginary the entrance to a Chinese space; it marks that here begins that what is understood to be all that Chinatown is in the American and transnational social-imaginations. It represents this in Chicago because it also represents this in countless other Chinatowns across the world (Chuenyan Lai, 84).

In fact, it is a huge controversy in Manhattan’s Chinatown that they still do not have a gate. Wellington Chen, the director of Chinatown Partnership, a neighborhood development group, expressed his frustration in a 2012 article that while, “Every single traditional Chinatown has a gateway,” they still did not have one (Pearson). Wendy Tan confirmed that besides Manhattan, “every large, traditional Chinatown in the U.S.” does in fact have a gateway arch (Pearson). The article cited the benefits of a gate as serving as a tourist attraction to lure in more guests and as a backdrop for vacation photos (Pearson). I would argue that the function and symbolism is more complicated than the article portrays, but I will explore this question that later in this chapter. The fact remains, that Chinatowns gates are heavily attached to the social imagination surrounding Chinatowns.

A return to 1975 sheds more light on insider representations and perceptions. It is vital to ponder why the gate was constructed to begin with, in order to perhaps better understand its relationship with the space it inhabits. I argue that Chicago’s Chinatown uses the gate to associate itself with other successful Chinatowns and was built as a symbol of the complicated and nuanced negotiations that were occurring in Asian American communities across the nation in the time period of its construction.
I could find no exact statements from the designers or funders of the gate to their motives for construction, but a look at the historical window in which it was built is telling. One strategy that cities often use to increase their fame and desirability is to construct a famous landmark (Briavel Holcomb in Judd and Fainstein 58). San Francisco's Chinatown gate was built in 1969, six years before the construction of Chicago’s gate. I would argue that Chicago's gate was built as a response to that because San Francisco's Chinatown was and is seen as the most prominent Chinatown in the U.S. and they may have wanted to emulate this and create their own famous landmark.

Historically speaking on a national scale, Chicago’s gate was built in 1975. This was a very volatile time period in the U.S. In just 1974, the Watergate scandal climaxed with Nixon’s resignation, the OPEC oil crisis occurred, and Saigon fell (Lee 180). Many factors also forever changed the American economy including inflation caused by Vietnam war spending, an “unprecedented combination of flat growth and double-digit inflation” and “the erosion of the structure of accumulation that had been shaped by the Fordist Compromise” (Lee 180, 181). In this context of neoconservatism and the post-Fordist hope to restore the national project, Asian America was framed as embodying America’s hope for a return to its previous power and global reach (Lee 183). Asian America was seen as representing “discipline, obedience, and return to family values” (Lee 183). Robert G. Lee argues that,

The restorationist narrative constructs a nostalgic imagery of American society and culture that the model minority is mobilized to revivify… The Asian American model minority is thus a simulacrum of both an imaginary Asian tradition from which it is wishfully constructed and an American culture for which it serves as a nostalgic mirror. The model minority can operate as the
paragon of conservative virtues that all Americans should emulate only if Asian Americans remain like “us” but utterly are not “us.” (183)

Was the gate truly built to represent the Chinese community in Chicago or was it built to satisfy a desire for what a Chinatown was expected to be, namely as Lee argues, “like “us” but utterly are not “us’” (183)? The gate calls upon imagery of an imagined Asian tradition that satisfies a mainstream desire of a constant reminder of their otherness. But it also symbolizes the Chinese community’s success and celebration of the mainstream values such as hard work and dedication that the U.S. wanted to return to in order to restore its lost dominance. Furthermore, it relies heavily on the social imagination of what a Chinatown is “supposed” to be. Mayer states, “To fulfill their function as urban markers, Chinatowns the world over strive to correspond with certain expectations regarding their architectural makeup and their cultural life” (15). She identifies a gate as one of these architectural features (15). In fact she argues that symbols such as the gate no longer “necessarily gesture towards authentic Chineseness, they rather seem to function as universal signs of ‘Chinatownness,’ sharing “the symbolic reference to an imaginary archetypal Chinatown that is manifest in names, rituals and decoration” (15,16). She identifies this “Chinatownness“ as being associated with a series of contradicting ideas: “reality and fantasy and involved complex interplays of anxiety, xenophobia, exoticization, and desire” (18).

However, the gate also represents the uniqueness of this particular Chinatown in this specific time and place. Not only was the gate constructed just six years after the gate in San Francisco and in the context of a nation shaken by riveting world events and a
search for a perceived lost identity as discussed, but it was also constructed in a neighborhood in Chicago that was going through monumental changes. During the time of the construction of the gate, Chinatown was adjusting to the continued movement of white immigrant groups to the suburbs and negotiating its increasingly intimate and at times volatile relationship to the nearby African American community (Lan 21). The gate was also constructed shortly after the city mandated construction on the Dan Ryan Expressway demolished apartment buildings and houses in Chinatown, just across the street from where the gate stands now (21). Even though the project was never completed, the site of the former housing remained vacant but eventually turned into a parking lot for the many visitors that the Chinatown attracted, guided to it by the sight of the iconic gate. In general, Chinatown is blocked from ever physically expanding because of years of city sanctioned construction projects that wall it off on all sides. Thus, as previously stated, Lan argues that the gate represents the strength and vitality of this community as well as its commitment to stay in the inner city even as many groups around them left, crime rates soared and the city continued to limit their mobility and cultural expression (21). The gate stands in proud defiance of all of these factors that added up to say that this gate should not exist in a community that was not supposed to be as successful as it is.

I argue that insiders to Chinatown today, such as the Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, also actively work to construct the gate as a symbol of Chinatown as an active community full of real people, and not just a tourist attraction. This encourages a consumption of the gate that is more nuanced and respectful to the community. The Chamber of Commerce uses an outline of the gate as their logo, thus associating
themselves closely with the image of the gate. Considering that the very active organization identifies some of its main objectives as educating others on the cultures and customs of the community, beautifying the community, hosting events and holding educational workshops for community members, it shows that they want the gate to be attached to an image of an active, vibrant space ("Welcome to Chicago Chinatown"). On their website they also have a list of “Places of Interest,” one of which is the Chinatown gate. Vital to note, however, is that almost all of the other sites listed, such as church communities, the Pui Tak Center and Dr. Sun Yet Sen Park (“popular with the locals”) demonstrate that Chinatown is an active community ("Welcome to Chicago Chinatown"). Thus, by listing the gate as one of these fourteen sites to see, it associates the gate with this image.

Thus the Chinatown gate represents both a symbol of exotic difference to attract tourists that was very recognizable because of its associations with the social imagination surrounding Chinatowns and a symbol of the strength, resilience and life of the existing community of Chinatown in Chicago. Overall, as Lan comments, “the development of Chicago’s Chinatown community has been fraught with tensions between Chinatown as a cultural/ideological construct and Chinatown as a living, breathing Chinese American community” (13). The gate represents this tension and offers the space of Chinatown up for a type of consumption that is very nuanced. It both invites tourists and visitors into the space and directs their attention on where to consume, but also pays homage to Chinese culture and the unique history of Chicago’s Chinatown, asking for a consumption of the space that is respectful of this past.
Outsider Representations and Perceptions: Visitors and Tourists to the Space and its Consumption

After reading dozens of reviews from outsiders about Chinatown, I argue that the gate serves as a medium through which the space of Chinatown is consumed. A website called Metrowalkz, which publishes different walking tours of Chicago online, has a tour for Chinatown ("Chinatown Chicago Self-Guided Walking Tour and Sightseeing Map"). Out of seven suggested stops in Chinatown, the gate is number two. Wentworth Ave., the street immediately connected to the gate is also one of the sites on the tour, which I argue further shows the consumption of the gate even though the street is not physically a part of the gate. Due to the way the gate frames this street and through the mystique of the gate itself it further attaches the street to the social imaginary that surrounds Chinatown gates and therefore Chinatown overall. The language used in the description of the gate also places it as the entryway to Chinatown and as a must-see stop for those visiting, “…Chinatown's landmark gateway was installed in 1975. The Chinatown Gate marks the entrance to the heart of Chicago's Chinatown, with its numerous shops, restaurants, churches, grocers and bakeries” ("Chinatown Chicago Self-Guided Walking Tour and Sightseeing Map"). It is also important to unpack that it is the second sight on the tour. The only one before it is the “Nine Dragon Wall,” which is a beautiful wall depicting dragons in vibrant colors that is located across the street from the gate and towards the parking lot and subway stop. The fact that the gate comes so early in the tour and only after the site that is near the modes of transportation that outside visitors would use to arrive show that it is a site that is intended for outsiders to use as the framing of their experience in Chinatown.
Other outsiders who wrote about Chinatown online expressed similar sentiments about the gate being the entrance to all that is Chinatown. An individual’s blog about Ping Tom Memorial Park describes Chicago’s Chinatown in the following manner: “As you take a stroll down Cermak and Wentworth, the ornate terra cotta Gateway welcomes you to the ancient Chinese culture and it beckons you to explore a new world within the city of Chicago. Chinatown offers the tourists unique shops, exotic foods, colorful festivities and a glimpse of what China is all about” (Alvarez). This shows how the blogger literally sees the gate as an entryway to a glimpse of China; it is almost like a portal to a completely different place. This reminds me of the point that historically, “Chinatown remained to be seen as a city in the city, a world of its own” (Mayer 6). The framing of this description of the gate also shows that the gate is seen as the entrance to Chinatown. The blogger only goes into great detail about the Chinatown in the rest of her blog after this dramatic introduction of the gate. Not only does the gate frame the physical Chinatown for the blogger, but it also frames the exotic and foreignness that Chinatown represents.

As I have already argued, the Chinatown gate serves as an entry point to the consumption of the rest of Chinatown by outsiders. I also argue that this consumption is often superficial because of the narratives that are told and not told when interacting with the gate. An article written in January of 2012 in the Daily Herald, suburban Chicago’s largest daily newspaper, highlights the celebration of Chinatown’s 100th anniversary in Chicago and explains basic parts of the community’s history, such as when it was first settled by the Chinese (Boerema). At the bottom of the article they drew attention to a few “Places to See” in Chinatown, the first of which is the gate. They described the gate
in the following way, “Location: South Wentworth Avenue and West Cermak Road, One of Chinatown's most identifiable landmarks, the gate was considered the original entryway into Chinatown. Features the basic principles of feng shui design” (Boerema). It fascinates me that even after so carefully laying out the history of Chinatown and celebrating its 100th anniversary throughout the article, that they could be so blatantly misguided about the gate. How could the gate be considered the original entryway into Chinatown when it was only built in 1975 and Chinatown celebrates its founding in 1912? My point is not to call out this one newspaper article for a historical error, but rather to draw attention to the larger conclusion that I come to after reading dozens of outsider representations and perceptions about Chinatown and the gate. Outsiders tell the narrative about the gate that they want it to tell- that the gate perfectly represents the entrance to this ethnic enclave and that it always has, because it is authentic. There is no deeper understanding of how the gate could be seen as a symbol of the contested and complicated site that Chinatown is or that the gate was built for many reasons besides just as a physical entry point, as I explored in the section about on insiders.

A reviewer named “meterologist1” wrote in an August 2004 post about Chinatown on Virtualtourist.com that

Chicago’s Chinatown is primarily found on Cermak Rd., Wentworth Ave., and Archer Ave. The picture shows a typical Chinatown gate at the intersection of Cermak and Wentworth. The typical Chinatown street with restaurants and shops is found on Wentworth Ave. And that’s all there is to Chinatown. There are no special attractions here. The shops mainly sell Chinese gifts and decorations and household items. There are a few shops that sell fresh produce and meats, but not many I think.
This description is fascinating for many reasons. What most interests me is how meteorologist values the area of Chinatown primarily based off of its consumability. He only sees the noteworthy parts of Chinatown as being where one can spend money (shop and eat). All of this is framed with the Chinatown gate, which is seen as a part of the valued section because it is “typical” and fits the reviewer’s understanding of what a “typical” Chinatown should be. There is no mention of the history of Chinatown or its value as an existing, vibrant community with living, breathing people. Thus the consumption of the site displaces the Other and through decontextualization denies the significance of its history (hooks 31). This displays a consumption of the space that shows complete disregard of the voices of the community.

In total, I argue that to a large extent the gate is a medium through which the space of Chinatown is consumed because is it considered one of the “places to see” in the neighborhood. It is the most photographed structure that appears on many of the post cards and other visual representations of the space and it is frequently mentioned when Chicago’s Chinatown is spoken or written of. Even if the commentator doesn’t mention the gate explicitly in the review or comment, there is usually a picture of it, showing that it has seen as the most symbolic and recognizable part of the space. Dennis R. Judd and Susan S. Fainstein describe on page 7 sites such as the gate as an object that we are taught gaze at,

Even when not traveling, people know the places they might visit and the sights at which they might look…The experiences and places marking these established routes are constructed through signs and signifiers that name and enshrine particular places as sacred objects of the tourist ritual. In this way the tourist is taught how to “gaze” upon the object or place being visited” (7)
I argue Chinatown is viewed as a place that outsiders should gaze at; and that the gate in particular represents this. It is seen as an anchor to frame the rest of Chinatown as an exotic space accessible to outsiders and is done in a superficial way that demands no true understanding of the history or complexity of the space. Thus, as Bonnie Tsui argues, "Visitors to Chinatown today have a role, just as residents do, in the bartering of cultural currency" (Tsui 246). The gate is manipulated by outsiders to tell the narratives that they want to hear from it in order to have the experience they expect from Chinatown and not have to consider the voices of community members.

**Addressing the Cycle: the Perpetuation of Collective and Socially Imagined Concepts of Chinatown**

The question must now be addressed of if and how the Chinatown gate in Chicago continues the cycle of the creation of collective/socially imagined concepts of Chinatown. To begin with, simply by existing, in a way the gate continues the cycle because it is an architectural feature that is expected because it is seen as a feature that every Chinatown has. Therefore, visitors see the Chinatown as more authentic because of the gate and then conversely collectively and socially imagine authentic Chinatowns everywhere as having gates. I argue that the gate is also consumed in such a way that requires no knowledge of the history of the community or really an acknowledgement that the community is living, breathing and active. It is often mentioned as an entrance to a space that is exotified and valued purely as a place to eat and buy “authentic” goods. Thus, it continues the social imagination of Chinatown as an exotic, mysterious place.

However, by placing a plaque on the side of the gate that explains what the Chinese characters on it mean and explaining the history of the essay “The Book of
Rites,” an attempt is made by insiders to the space to encourage a more thoughtful consumption of the gate. By using the symbol of the gate in modern, active Chinese organizations’ advertisements and websites such as the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, the gate also stands as a representation of Chinatown as an active community. These presentations of the gate interrupt the socially imagined concept of Chinatown and provide a different picture of an active, changing community. Furthermore, to argue that the gate is simply a stereotypical representation would be “to perpetuate the stylizations of the past and to underestimate the extent of agency and self-determination in the daily lives of Chinese expatriates and migrants…” (Mayer 1).

However, overall I argue that Chicago’s Chinatown in particular continues the cycle because of the needs of the community. The economy of the neighborhood is primarily based off of the restaurant business so naturally it needs tourists and outsiders to the space to come and consume in order to survive (Lan 8). Thus it is to its advantage to play into the social imaginary of Chinatown as an exotic playground because that is partially what outsiders expect and demand (Lan 14). In the section above on insider representations and perceptions I posed the question about the gate, “Was it truly built to represent the Chinese community in Chicago or was it built to satisfy a desire for what a Chinatown was expected to be?” I argue that the gate at times can and does both and thus attempts to somewhat interrupt the socially imagined concept of Chinatown, especially when it is consumed in connection with other images of Chinatown as an active community. However I argue that the overall impact is that the consumption of the gate cycles to perpetuate collective and socially imagined concepts of Chinatown because it is
too easy to consume it without much thought behind what it represents as more than just a tourist attraction.
Chapter 4

The Black Urban Space and North Minneapolis: Bringing it Full Circle

“…small urban places are the places where individuals- using only the material environment as a prop- tell their stories in front of an audience” (Sanders 274).

Collective and Socially Imagined concepts of Black Urban Spaces

In 1974, David Ley, a researcher studying the black community of Philadelphia wrote,

In this study we enter the world of Black America, a world as unknown to some Americans as the Southern Continent was to eighteenth century Europe, but a world of which they nevertheless hold imagery as uncompromising as the old imagery of the southern landmass held by the contemporaries of James Cook (3).

He continued to say,

Persistently, national opinion polls have shown that black reality is not shared by the white world. This is scarcely surprising when the true limitations of interracial contact are realized. A national Harris survey in July 1970 revealed the remarkable extent of segregation. Of all whites polled, 79 percent “had almost no” black friends; 56 percent did not even shop at stores frequented by blacks…Segregation remains an accepted norm of American society (29).
Ley wrote these words in 1974. How much has this changed, nearly forty years later? According to the 2010 book *The Paradoxes of Integration*, in terms of social contacts, whites still have the lowest level of integration of all racial groups (Oliver 118). According to Oliver’s research, only 22% of whites report having “more than one in ten of their friends or neighbors as being of another race” (118). Are perceptions of African Americans in the U.S. still shaped in very similar ways as when Ley published his book? Are most Americans still largely unfamiliar with Black urban spaces but have a firm image of these spaces as a place nonetheless?

To begin with, it is pertinent to explore where some of the images in the social imagined and collective conceptualization of Black urban spaces come from. Film scholar Paula J. Massood attests several large migrations from the South to the North and West, “combined with white flight from the cities to the newly emerging suburbs” to the changing of metropolitan areas and the increasingly large presence of African Americans in urban areas by the 1960’s and 70’s (81, 82). In fact, she argues that as a result of these demographic shifts, “African Americans became increasingly identified with urban spaces in the national imagination” (82). Other images were also attached to this social imagination of ‘urban= Black’ however. Urban rebellions riveted the nation from 1965 to 1968 also played a large impact on this social imagination (Massood 83). For the first time, these rebellions were broadcasted on television, for the whole country to see (Massood 83). Mark A. Reid describes the effects this had on suburban whites’ social imagination of Black urban spaces:

images of black inner city life were formed or reinforced by the television images that portrayed blacks looting neighborhood stores while buildings burned.
Destruction and the destructive seemed to define the black community. The combination of televised news coverage of the urban uprisings and the militant rhetoric of black armed resistance intensified white middle-class America’s opinions of blacks as violent people. (qtd. in Massood 83)

Thus there existed in the social imagination of some the belief that Black communities were violent and destructive. Massood clarifies the complexity of this social imagination by explaining how not everyone just saw violence and destruction when they turned on their television sets and witnessed these images: “Where white suburban America saw violence and destruction, black audiences saw resistance to specific wrongdoings of the inner city- disenfranchisement, poverty, decay, and unchecked police brutality” (83, 84).

From David Ley’s 1974 study of a Black neighborhood in Philadelphia, he explained that a lack of interracial contact led to a disconnect between the two racial communities. News about Black America rarely reached the white majority directly, “invariably it is transmitted via one of the news media. The media act as gatekeepers to interracial communication and as such they exhibit two distorting properties. They both filter information, that is cut out information considered insignificant or offensive to their readership, and they code information, that is, present it in a form palatable and consistent with the cultural norms of readers” (32). This situation formed perceptions of Black Americans in a pivotal time- towards the end of the Civil Rights Movement and it is vital to consider how this still continues today. In the twenty-first century, Film scholar Barbara C. Mennel attributes many understandings of spaces referred to as the ‘ghetto’ to film, “…American urban ghetto films…show the ghetto as masculinist, undifferentiated,
and utterly violent, and turn the ghetto into a commodity that feeds liberal racist and sexist anxieties and desires of mainstream America” (156).

Different academics throughout the twentieth century have also contributed to mainstream understandings of Black urban spaces. Oscar Lewis’s concept of the “culture of poverty” in the 1960’s influenced important governmental releases such as the Moynihan Report (1965), which focused on the root causes of Black poverty in the U.S. as a lack of nuclear families and a destructive tendency in Black culture leading back to slavery and Jim Crow discrimination, among others (“Inner Cities and Ghettos”). Others argued for and perpetuated the idea that poverty was caused by the welfare state, which “had altered incentives, undermined motivations, and increased dependency” (“Inner Cities and Ghettos”). All of these concepts, of which many, many more exist, have been heavily influential in forming socially imagined and collective concepts of the Black Urban Space.

**North Minneapolis**

The Twin Cities have been home to Black communities for more than 160 years (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 1). The first Black resident recorded by the U.S. Census in Minneapolis was Maria Haynes in 1849 (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 4). Black migrants moved to Minnesota for mainly economic reasons: “jobs and opportunities in urban areas and an abundance of land to homestead” (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 8). Although most migrated from the South, a significant number also came from Canada, mirroring the migration patterns of many Europeans (Taylor 1981, 75). St. Paul was the original location of most Black residents to
Minnesota but by 1910 St. Paul was slowly overshadowed by the growth of Minneapolis (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 8,9). However in general, the urban areas of Duluth, St. Paul, and Minneapolis were strong attractions for black youth from rural areas (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 9). In fact, throughout the 20th century, “the state’s rural black population remained small with most blacks (about 90%) preferring to live in the urban areas” (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 9). The village of St. Anthony, which was settled in 1849, later became the city of Minneapolis (Taylor, “The Blacks”). The settlers of St. Anthony formed the first formal Black Minnesotan religious organization around 1857 (Taylor, “The Blacks”). This however was further Southeast of the area that I am concentrating on. The first large established Black neighborhoods in North Minneapolis were established as early as 1910 in the Near-North and Willard-Hay neighborhoods (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 10).

During the outbreak of World War I, Minneapolis began to take the place of St. Paul as the “center of Black intellectual, social, and cultural life in the state” (Taylor, “The Blacks” 81). Due to restrictive housing covenants that were heavily put in practice by the 1920’s, there was a shift of the Black population from the city centers to adjacent wards (Taylor, “The Blacks” 81). North Side neighborhoods such as those I mentioned above opened up to Black settlement because they were being vacated by Jews (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 17). Author David Vassar Taylor mentions in his 2002 book that new enclaves developed in this area and by 1930, “a ghetto was clearly definable” (17). Taylor does not go into detail in his 2002 text about what he means by this, but I gather that he meant that a clearly defined geographical community was formed of majority Black residents and people had limited mobility in leaving the area. In
his 1981 text he does explain further that near North Minneapolis contained a large percentage of the city’s Black population and “had the highest incidence of blighted and deteriorating housing, poverty, vice, and crime” (Taylor, “The Blacks 81). Already during the early years of the formation of this concentrated population area there existed negative and racist perceptions of the residents as illiterate and “delinquent” despite the fact that a study conducted in “the Minneapolis ghetto” from 1923-1925 showed that “Black residents did not commit major crimes out of proportion to their numbers, as had been alleged” (Taylor, “The Blacks” 82). By 1930 this area also had one of the lowest illiteracy rates for Blacks in the entire country (Taylor, “The Blacks” 82).

Between 1950 and 1970 the Black population of the Twin Cities exploded; Minneapolis alone registered a 436% population increase in Black residents (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 51). No one is exactly sure why this large increase took place, but Taylor attests it to, “Belief in Minnesota’s liberal racial climate, expanded employment opportunities, more generous public assistance, and progressive legislation such as the Fair Employment Practice Act…” (51). Most of the migrants were from north-central states and the South (Taylor, “The Blacks 84). However, as Taylor explains, many of these beliefs were actually false because according to data, the racial climate in Minneapolis and St. Paul, “was not qualitatively better than in other northern cities” and there were in reality limited employment opportunities for undereducated and unskilled Blacks (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 51). Taylor therefore says it was not surprising that there was “serious civil disorder” in the Twin Cities on Labor Day weekend of 1968 (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 52, 54). Rioting in the Twin Cities never reached the levels that it did in other major American cities such as the
Watts area of Los Angeles and Detroit, but it reflected national sentiments in the Black community over, “intractable unemployment, discrimination in housing, and other forms of discriminatory behaviors” (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 54).

In the year 2000, a large majority (68,818) of all the Black residents of Minnesota lived in Minneapolis (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 72). This large number reflects demographic swings statewide that indicate that there has been dramatic growths in population, which can be attributed to “migration from other geographic areas” (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 72). Movement to the area and the Twin Cities in particular is further diversified by recent surges of immigration from several African nations (Taylor, “African Americans in Minnesota” 73). Taylor briefly explains how this trend impacts population numbers: “Although not African American by census definition, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis, Liberians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Kenyans, and others have increased the number of people of black African descent in Minnesota” (73).

Specificities of identification

The term “North Minneapolis” is very difficult to define because many people seem to conceptualize it in different ways. As is the case with the names of many communities, it is often difficult to pinpoint the exact geographic location of it. From what I am gathering from my research and from talking to friends who self-identify as from North Minneapolis, what is commonly referred to as “North Minneapolis” is, according to the city of Minneapolis’ website’s official terminology, the “Near North Community,” which is composed of about six smaller neighborhoods, one of which is also called “Near North” (“Neighborhood Profiles”). This community is located on the
Northwest side of Minneapolis and is divided from East Minneapolis by the Mississippi River. The music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis” was filmed by kids who are members of the North Community YMCA Teen and Youth Enrichment Center, which is located just at the border between Willard-Hay and Jordan, two of the neighborhoods that the City of Minneapolis defines as part of the community of North Minneapolis on their website.

One fascinating website I found, put together by individuals who identify as being from North Minneapolis, defines North Minneapolis as more broadly than what the city’s website defines as the Near North and Camden communities of Minneapolis. The individuals on the website self-identify as, “a collaborative of neighbors in north Minneapolis committed to seeking grassroots solutions to community issues, primarily through the use of web and technology” (“InsideNorthside”). In their long list of resources, they highlight businesses and organizations that are located geographically also in the Camden community, such as the Camden Community Historical Society and a link to the Camden newsletter, clearly demonstrating that they also consider this to be North Minneapolis (“InsideNorthside”). This of course geographically makes complete sense because Camden is actually farther North than Near North but is also interesting because not all sources identify North Minneapolis in this way. This definition of North Minneapolis also coincides with the definition from the Wikipedia page about Neighborhoods of Minneapolis because the author cites that, “Generalized names such as "North Minneapolis" are actually a combination of the Near North and Camden communities with each of these communities made up of several neighborhoods” ("Neighborhoods of Minneapolis"). Although Wikipedia is not the most reliable source, this article was written by a community member and because it is
impossible to come up with one definition for the boundaries of the community, it is vital
to see how a variety of sources define it. The definition of North Minneapolis being
comprised of Near North and Camden also fits my original introduction to North
Minneapolis, which was through my roommate who identifies as being from North
Minneapolis and having attended high school there. Both her home and high school are
located in Camden.

Interestingly, although it is difficult to define the exact area that is commonly
considered North Minneapolis, it is an extremely common term to use and has very
specific connotations associated with it. If one simply types in “North Minneapolis” into
google, the first word that is suggested is “crime.” A 2007 article from the local TV
station KARE11 referred to North Minneapolis as a neighborhood that grabs headlines
because it is, “dealing with big-city problems” (Goldberg). He does not define what that
exactly means but the implications are clear when he highlights throughout the rest of the
article how historically North Minneapolis had experienced less crime and neighbors
were friendlier to each other. I also came across many, many articles or travel posts that
described which areas of Minneapolis to avoid. Almost always, North Minneapolis was
the focus of the article. Only one article that I read, written by a travel writer on the Twin
Cities, defined what she meant by North Minneapolis geographically, defining it as, “the
northwest of the city, the part of Minneapolis north of I-394 and west of the Mississippi
River” (James). This is also interesting and speaks to how, as I have discussed throughout
my research thus far, the geographical imagination of a place can often be just as if not
more powerful than the official boundary lines. After all, boundaries and borders are
socially constructed, and how people identify space usually has a greater impact than what a government says.

Now that I have established the complexity of the borders of North Minneapolis, but generally identified it as the Camden and Near North communities, I need to address why I chose this as my Black Urban Space. I was originally interested in North Minneapolis because it was always touted as where the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis” came from. It is immediately noticeable that only Black bodies participate in the music video and I was interested in how this would contribute to or impact people’s already preconceived notions of North Minneapolis. I was also interested in the social imagination that I alluded to above that always surrounded North Minneapolis. “North Minneapolis” was an easy term that I often heard thrown around to stand in for “crime” and “dangerous,” much as the neighborhoods where I attended school growing up were referred to. I often also found that those words were easily interchanged with people’s perceptions, or depending on the individual, their experiences with the space being in some areas, majority African American. The more I investigated North Minneapolis, the more complicated I realized it was, as I also realized with my other two communities of analysis. North Minneapolis is ethnically and racially very diverse, comprising mostly of Black, White, Latino and Asian residents (“Neighborhood Profiles”), but according to data from the 2010 U.S. census, the majority of census tracts in North Minneapolis are majority Black (Bloch, Carter, McClean). However, I do not wish to brush over the complexity of the many neighborhoods that make up North Minneapolis, or with that very statement set a definitive label to what I think North Minneapolis is or should be defined as. Rather, the complexity of the conversation between the physical space and the
social imagination of the area that is in varying ways known to people as North
Minneapolis offers a rich site of analysis that will be fruitful to the overall discussion of
my research.

“Hot Cheetos and Takis”

The music video was produced by 12Twentythree Photography, a St. Paul based
compány that has produced several other popular music videos. A group of kids, who call
themselves “Y.N. Rich Kids,” participated in the North Community Beats and Rhymes
Program in the summer of 2012 at the YMCA in North Minneapolis (North Community
YMCA) and wrote both their own lyrics and star in the music video. The children are
mostly grade- and middles school aged (Riemenschneider). Kids in this program have
produced eight albums since its start in 2006 (Memmot). The program highlights themes
of anti-bullying, anti-violence, and drug prevention (Memmot). The music video was shot
near Wally’s Foods on Penn Ave. N., which is about eight minutes walking distance from
the YMCA (Riemenschneider). After its release in August of 2012 the music video went
viral on the internet and received millions of hits on youtube. The video follows the story
of this group of kids as they rap about their favorite snacks- hot cheetos and takis. In
total, seven of the large group of kids rap and play a main role. Hot Cheetos, which are a
product of FritoLay, are officially called “Crunchy Flamin’ Hot Cheese Flavored Snacks”
and are very spicy versions of the classic cheetos. Barcel, the producer of Takis, is a
Mexican snacks company owned by Grupo Bimbo, the largest Mexican-owned baking
company in the country. There is also a branch in the U.S., located in Texas. Takis are a
rolled-up, crunchy corn chip snack that come in a variety of flavors. The flavor that is
featured in the video is in the purple bag and is called “Takis Fuego,” which is described on Barcel’s website as, “hot chili pepper and lime epicness” ("Barcel USA - Brands - Barcel"). The different scenes in the video take place in front of the corner store, in the park near a playground, on a basketball court, and riding bikes down a street, all around the neighborhood of the YMCA.

Insider Representations and Perceptions: The performers the Music Video and its Consumption

The insider perspective of the music video is the video itself and those who made it. The video starts with the words “Y.N. Rich Kids,” the name of the kids’ group, in a graffiti-like script. The use of the graffiti-script automatically makes the viewer think of an urban setting. The letters go in and out of focus and appear on a scratched screen. This sets a tone of an old, home video, which provides an intimate, personal feel. It reminds the viewer that this is not a perfect, polished Hollywood production. Massood identifies filming techniques such as the feel of hand-held cameras and grainy film stock as giving the film “a documentary-like realism” (146). Returning to the question of authenticity, I argue that this style makes the video feel more “authentic.” It gives the video more of a feel from truly coming from the community; that the kids who are in it truly played a large role in its production.

The title announcing the name of the video is also in two significant scripts, namely those which are used on the packages of Hot Cheetos and Takis respectively. Thus, there is instant brand recognition and commodification is even encoded in the song title. One of the young rappers, Dane Jones, leaves his tag at the beginning of the song, which is a traditional introduction to many Hip Hop songs. Just with this one simple line,
this type of music is instantly recognizable; the viewer knows to expect a Hip Hop music video. The opening shot behind Dane Jones’ tag is also very significant. The viewer sees a chain link fence, a cracked wall leading up to an overgrown bush, cracked sidewalks, unmanicured lawns, and a street full of cars. The space is instantly recognizable as an urban space. There is no mistaking this for the suburbs. The instant visual presence of two black male bodies further spurs this connection. This space is not only urban, it is a Black urban space. Both of these two factors are equally essential in the labeling of the space in this way because as Massood argues, “…the city is an active presence” in film, “…playing a central role like any character” (86).

The next shot, that of Wally’s Corner Store, furthers the identification to a Black urban space. The corner store is a major trope of the inner city. The shots of the corner store further accentuate the personal nature of the music video because they show the name and phone number on the side of the store, along with the sign “Open Everyday.” It is obvious that this is not a chain store, it is apparently an integral part of the community it is located in. This further perpetuates the feeling of authenticity that the music video emits. The parking lot of the corner store also reminds us that we are in an urban space. There are no lines in the lot- representing perceptions of the inner city as “chaotic” and “unrefined.” The corner store windows have bars in them- alluding to a possible sense of danger or insecurity.

The corner store is one of the central backgrounds of the music video but it is important to note what is in front of it. Always exactly centered in the shot, in the highly visible and high- lighted intersection of the two sides of the corner store, are the black
bodies that fill this music video. I already mentioned the association between Black bodies and Black urban spaces but it is important to also note what is on the black bodies. Their attire is highly classed. They are not wearing school uniforms or Burberry, but rather white tank tops, basketball shorts, and clothes from the brand Rocawear. And these clothes aren’t just worn by anybody; they are worn by predominantly young Black bodies. Massood identifies this focus on urban youth culture through song and dance as a characteristic of hip-hop films (122). Massood argues that there was a redefinition of the inner city during the Reagan and Bush (Sr.) years and therefore a “…related and increasing conflation of African American popular culture (specifically film and music) with youth culture, especially as it relates to a rap and later to a gangsta’ rap aesthetic” (147).

Stylistically, besides the familiar tag in the beginning of the song, there are many other elements that remind the viewer/listener that this song is firmly placed in the genre of Hip Hop. This is all worth commenting on due to the firm association between Hip Hop and Black urban spaces in the American social imagination (Berry 264). The beat is reminiscent of that common in American rapper Gucci Mane’s songs. In terms of the hook and rhyme patterns, they mirror current trends in commercial rap. The flow of the rhyme patterns is similar to that of many currently popular rappers, including A$AP Rocky, Jay-Z and Kanye West. In fact, there is a direct reference to the song from their collaborative album, “Watch the Throne.” In the second verse of their song “Gotta Have It,” Jay-Z raps, “Dummy that your daddy is, tell ‘em I just want my racks, (Racks, on racks, on Racks) Racks!”. In the song “Hot Cheetos and Takis,” in the sixth verse, the only female rapper in the video, Jasiona, raps “I’m getting snacks on snacks on snacks,
Yeah I am eating all of them.” This is clearly a direct reference to the song “Gotta Have it.”

The hook in particular, “Hot Cheetos and Takis, Hot Cheetos and Takis, I can’t get enough of these Hot Cheetos and Takis, Got my fingers stained red and I can’t get them off me, You can catch me and my crew eating Hot Cheetos and Takis,” repeated several times, resembles the work of popular rapper Waka Flocka Flame ("YNRichkids-Hot Cheetos & Takis Lyrics"). Interestingly, the repeated scene in front of the corner store in the Hot Cheetos and Takis music video is nearly identical to the scene in front of a corner store in Waka Flocka’s music video with Slim Dunkin “Twin Tours 2 Intro Trailer.” Both the angle with the corner store centered in the background, along with the focus on two black male bodies in the center of the shot (with the edge of the corner store directly behind them at all times) are exactly the same as in the music video I studied. Is this an interesting coincidence or a further indication of the video’s attempt to identify with current trends in Hip Hop? Or perhaps more telling, is this simply an indication of the proliferation of the trope of the corner store in black urban spaces and demonstrates how music producers utilize this trope to create association with this distinctive space?

It is very important to note the female presence in this song, or the lack there of. There is only one female, Jasiona, who raps one verse in the entire song, compared to several among the other six main male rappers. Although the song does not contain the sexist or misogynistic images of females that are common in much rap music (hooks 35), if one looks closer, there is a plethora of interesting material to analyze. The lyrics are naturally juvenile because they were written by the kids themselves. This is part of the
charm of the song. But although as I mentioned there few sexist images of women in this
music video (perhaps because in fact there are just a lack of images of females at all),
there still are allusions made to sexualizing women. Females are still offered up as a
token to exchange and bargain over. At the end of the first verse, which is rapped by
Dame Jones, the lyrics read, “Then I walk up to your girl and she asking me to share”
(“YNRichkids- Hot Cheetos & Takis Lyrics”). Thus, a threat is being made to the
unidentified “you”’s girl because she wants the hot cheetos and takis so badly. So
although the females have no strong visual presence in the music video, they are still
present in the lyrics, as a site of contestation between the main rapper and an unidentified
subject. Also, a lack of presence is still very significant to note because it shows that
female voices are not represented. Many scholars who study rap music identify its origins
as being very male-oriented (Berry 264, hooks 35). This form of expression was
especially associated with urban public spaces such as those depicted in the music video,
“Male creativity, expressed in rap and dancing, required wide-open spaces, symbolic
frontiers where the body could do its thing, expand, grow, and move, surrounded by a
watching crowd” (hooks 35). Not only was this space associated with urban males, but it
was disassociated with females, “Domestic space, equated with repression and
containment, as well as with the “feminine” was resisted and rejected so that an assertive
patriarchal paradigm of competitive masculinity and its concomitant emphasis on
physical prowess could emerge. As a result, much rap music is riddled with sexism and
misogyny” (hooks 35). Thus the presence of only one female-bodied individual in the
music video is recognizable and common for many Hip Hop videos, making the
consumption of “Hot Cheetos and Takis” an even more accessible process.
As I discussed above, the music video employs a sort of documentary-style, particularly in the opening credits. Massood argues that such verité (rough translation: documentary-style) filming led to explorations of the city that, “offered their audiences undeniable voyeuristic (fetishistic and narcissistic) pleasure, either acting as anthropological documents for audiences unfamiliar with the ghetto or as sources of identification for those were familiar with it” (85). I argue that the documentary-style of the music video leads the viewer to believe that they are getting an intimate look into the real lives of these kids. The fact that it was self-produced and made by the kids themselves just furthers this notion. I argue that to a certain extent, the insiders to the space (the kids themselves who are in the video) encourage consumption of the space because they invite the viewer into what appears to be a more intimate setting because of the documentary-style filming and the homemade quality. Intimacy and consumption are linked because intimacy implies authenticity, which the white, mainstream palate searches for in an experience with the Other (hooks 21).

However, an invitation to consumption does not necessarily imply something purely negative. I do not think that the kids were thinking, “Come receive voyeuristic pleasure from watching this as we welcome you into our space.” Rather, it is expected that they want their music video to be consumed because they produced it to share a message and they put it on youtube so it could be watched by a large audience. Furthermore, why would they not portray this space, when it is their neighborhood and that is what they know? How it is and isn’t perceived as part of the social imagination and collective understanding of a Black urban space lies in the hands of the viewers (the consumers) but I argue that in order to facilitate and promote consumption of the video,
the kids utilize to their advantage certain parts of this social imagination, particularly recognizable Hip Hop tropes connected to Black urban spaces, in order to create a very accessible product to consumers. By employing recognizable tropes from well known, mainstream hip hop music videos, the video invites a consumption of the space that is instantly accessible because of how common and recognizable this is.

Outsider Representations and Perceptions: Viewers of the Music Video and their Consumption

I identify the outsiders to the space as the viewers. The five-minute music video has had over six million views since it was placed on Youtube on August 6, 2012. Clearly, it has been immensely popular. Responses to the music video display an interesting paradox that the American public has with urban spaces. As Anne Beamish explains, “…our images of and ideas about the city and community are full of contradictions. On one hand, we reject urban life, wish to escape it, and fear those unlike us; on the other hand, we romanticize the city as a place of excitement, adventure, and opportunity” (Vale and Warner 285). The media and public vilify and criminalize North Minneapolis, while on the other hand, the video has been wildly successful. The Rolling Stones referred to it as “what may be the summer's final truly great jam” (Gross) and it was named one of the nine best music videos of the year by TIME magazine (Locke).

The video has been so successful in fact, that it has spawned a variety of interesting responses to it. A group of three young adults made their own youtube video to respond to the original “Hot Cheetos and Takis” video. This four-minute video, entitled “Hot Cheetos and Takis Reaction,” has received nearly half a million views and
was released about three weeks after the original version came out. The young adults’ reaction to the original music video is very positive and shows that they identify closely with the lyrics, and more importantly the main theme of the song: hot cheetos and takis. They show this by incorporating certain lyrics and melodies from the song into their video, dancing along to the beat, and of course, consuming large amounts of hot cheetos and takis. Comments on the video are mainly positive and show once again, the large impact that the original music video has had. Viewers weigh in on both their opinions on which chip is better, as well as their delight over this reaction video. The fact that viewers could make their own reaction music video to this original music video shows the uniqueness of the medium that these sources use: the internet. Not only is the music video consumed privately in millions of homes across the world, but because of the nature of the internet, experiences with the consumption can also be documented and shared with thousands of other people. The response music video and viewers comments about what chips they prefer also highlight the triple nature of consumption that exists in “Hot Cheetos and Takis.” Not only is the video itself consumed but also within the video, hot cheetos and takis are consumed, which in turn encourages a consumption of these snacks by viewers. I argue that this triple consumption encourages not only a further connection between the snacks and the Black urban space presented but it also encourages a type of consumption that is seen as being carried out as easily and as superficially as the snacks are portrayed to be consumed. By nature as convenience store snacks they are fast, cheap, and accessible. They are also considered spicy and different than other classic convenience store snacks such as potato chips. I believe that the music video would not be consumed with the same level of excitement that it has been if there wasn’t also the
element of the snacks in the film. All comments about the music video inevitably mention the snacks just by naming the title and most focus on the consumption of them. Many of the reviews inquire or explain what hot cheetos and takis are, which are usually answered by other reviewers, providing free advertising for this consumable good.

Similar to the reaction video, most of the reviews of the music video focus on how cute the kids are and how entertaining it is. Blogger Rembert Browne of Grantland commented in his August 16, 2012 post about the music video when explaining why the whole story behind the video was “impressively adorable”: “Secondly, just look at them. Sometimes they’re in their street clothes that scream “I’m a tween who watches music videos in 2012,” and other times they’re all just wearing their basketball jerseys. Calling it precious is a huge understatement” (Browne). This shows a lack of understanding of Black urban spaces as parts of a historical city that have suffered numerous effects of segregation, deindustrialization and poverty. Thus, the consumption of the site displaces the Other and, through decontextualization, denies the significance of North Minneapolis’s history. HOWEVER, I argue that the overall impact of these comments and others that are similar are more positive than negative. Perhaps they do not give full credit to the complexity of North Minneapolis’s history, but for once they tell a positive narrative of a Black urban space, something that is so rare in mainstream media. How often are the words “adorable” and “precious” used to describe Black urban youth? Thus I argue that overall the impact of such comments demonstrates a consumption of the music video that is extremely humanizing.
Despite this, it must be acknowledged that, particularly on youtube, there were an incredible amount of offensive and at times racist comments made about the music video, often attaching the bodies in the video to stereotypical images of Black people in urban spaces. I encountered several instances of the use of the ‘N-word’ in my survey of youtube comments along with comments directly attacking the kids. For example, one reviewer (‘Sar Casm’) commented in the beginning of April, “in about 20 years, those [hot cheetos and takis] will be replaced by cocaine and cannabis” (Hot Cheetos and Takis). This alludes to the racist stereotype of Blacks being attached to drug use in urban areas (Berry 134). Another commentator who identifies themselves as ‘Slayinbeersanddeers’ commented also in early April, “I'm ashamed_ to be from MN after seeing this. Who wants to place bets on what prison they'll end up in 10-25 years...? I know kolidge is out of the question for them” (sic) (Hot Cheetos and Takis). Commentator ‘krisellyson20’ notes also in early April, “killing cheetos today killing each other tomorrow” (Hot Cheetos and Takis). This connects to the social imaginary of Black urban spaces as being places of crime, violence and full of menaces to society (Berry 134).

Thus, although just a music video that only exists on a screen, many viewers perceive it as a true risk and threat. Russel Nye coined the term “riskless risk,” which can describe “urban entertainment destinations that offer an intense emotional experience without threat, accompanied by reference to an authentic experience. The creation of faux authenticity in themed designs is an attempt to mediate the desire for authenticity—real-life contact with diverse populations and societies, with the guarantee of safety provided by a heavily designed and controlled world” (qtd. in Lukas 247). Nye however is
referring to video games and other virtual environments, but I think this idea can also be compared to the music video. In many ways music videos and video games are similar; they both present a virtual environment that can be watched over and over again on a screen. Yet “Hot Cheetos and Takis” is different because although it is safe to watch the video on the screen and in a way the viewers can enter the Black urban space and still feel completely safe, the viewers know that real kids made the music video and that it represents a true and existing place. Thus, they still perceive it as a threat.

The music video was highly visible after its release in the Summer of 2012 and continues to be consumed at an incredible rate by people around the world. Images of the Black urban youth have been projected onto computer screens over six million times and due to the nature of the medium of the internet, even the responses to this music video have taken on a life of their own. Although much of the consumption of the music video demonstrates a humanization of the young performers and the space they represent, there were also countless instances in which viewers attached negative and stereotypical parts of the social imagination of Black urban spaces to the music video and presented the youth as threats. Viewers also consumed the video in a way that promoted more consumption, both of the music video itself and of the material snack products.
Addressing the Cycle: the Perpetuation of Collective and Socially Imagined Concepts of the Black Urban Space

As Bennett, Ekinsmyth and Shurmer-Smith posit, “The landscape is never read without awareness of other texts…memories of previously experienced places, images in films, documentaries, news broadcasts, travel guides, advertisements, all of which transmit their own particular message” (91). I argue that similarly, no such text is ever consumed without reference to some landscape. My text of analysis (the music video) thus demonstrates how this process is somewhat cyclical. If one reads the landscape with awareness of other texts, and reads texts with the awareness of landscapes, then inherently the text will influence how the viewer sees landscapes, both physical and imagined, from then on. As Paula S. Massood identified, the Black city was already a recognizable trope in film since the 1970’s (116). Thus, by demonstrating many of the key signifiers of this trope in the music video and being clearly identified as a Black urban space, I would argue that it very clearly cycles back into the creation of collective and socially imagine concepts of Black urban spaces. Especially because people see it and know that it was produced by real kids, I would argue that it even more so reaffirms people’s perceptions of Black urban spaces because people think this is it-this is reality- this is how it really is.

However I argue that the music video does in a way interrupt this social imagination, or at least cause it to be viewed slightly differently. While it reaffirms and confirms images of a Black urban space from the social imagination, it also provides an extremely positive picture of this space, which for once causes North Minneapolis to be
celebrated instead of ridiculed or feared. Although this celebration can at times come off as patronizing, it should be given merit as at least being something different than the typical narrative about Black urban spaces. A quote from the reviewer in the Star Tribune illustrates this perfectly, “On paper, it sounds like your average hip-hop video: a posse of rappers hanging outside a corner food mart, rhyming about their vices. On YouTube, though -- where the clip has attracted more than 1 million views in a week and a half -- the song by north Minneapolis' Y.N.RichKids offers something far more wholesome than Snoop Dogg's "Gin & Juice”” (Riemenschneider). Although the music video appears to initially confirm conceptualizations of Black urban spaces, when it is given a closer look it is seen differently because of the positive messages it offers. It offers no images of violence, drugs, or other negative messages that are often stereotypically associated with Black urban spaces. In fact, in many ways it portrays the space of in the music video as very safe. There are almost only kids in the music video and they roam around the space alone, and never once appear to be in danger or in harms way.

However a distinction also must be made here that although there was much celebration of the music video in larger publications such as NPR, Rolling Stone, and TIME Magazine, this was not necessarily the case with the comments on youtube. It is impossible and pointless to determine which source (mainstream publications or youtube comments) more accurately shows how the music video is perceived in terms of perceptions of Black urban spaces. What matters here is that there is a perceivable difference in the common narrative that is told about Black urban spaces due to this music video at least in some sources, and it must be said that these are well known sources that will reach a large audience and be heavily influential. Therefore the music
video does in many ways interrupt the cycle of collective and socially imagined ideas of Black Urban spaces.

**A music video is not a Space, or is it?**

The use of a music video as a site of analysis was my personal challenge. A music video is not, after all, physical space. It can represent or portray physical space, but in the moment of viewing, it is no longer physical space. In film theory, there is a complicated relationship between “…the actual world and the spatiotemporal systems that create cinematic genres” (Massood 6). There must be a distinction made between the world created by the text and the world outside of the text (Bakhtin ctd. in Massood 6). If the distinction is blurred between the two, there can be a form of “naïve realism” (Bakhtin qtd. in Massood 6). This is particularly meaningful in African American film because, “…it acknowledges the influence that exterior reality may have on a text- for example, the relationship between the Moynihan report and the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorder and blaxploitation film in the 1970s- without mistaking cinematic representation for actual extradiegetic circumstance” (Massood 6).

In the same way, although “Hot Cheetos and Takis” is not a film, the music video blurs the line between reality and make believe. It never mentions North Minneapolis specifically in the video. If one is familiar with North Minneapolis, then one might recognize parts of the neighborhood in the music video, but there are no obvious signs that the kids are from North Minneapolis of all urban communities in the U.S. This could be any made up space. However it both represents and stands in the place of North Minneapolis because it generated such media stir and popularity on the internet, that it
was frequently accompanied by the story that it was made by kids in a YMCA in North Minneapolis.

Determining how this ties back into the socially imagined/collective concepts of neighborhoods is very complicated because it depends to a large extent on whose perspective it is coming from. For example, if the viewer is not familiar with North Minneapolis at all, seeing the music video may simply cause the viewer to call upon their social imagination of Black urban spaces. For example, in a review on the Village Voice entitled “The 20 Best Things about “Hot Cheetos and Takis,”” number 18 reads, “The universality of all of this. Do you think of Minneapolis as a place where there are lots of corner stores? Do you think of Minnesota as a hotbed for Atlanta-reminiscent rap? These are kids showing you both things are, in one small way, true” (Hutchins). The place presented in the music video did not fit the reviewer’s conception of Minnesota as a place; to Hutchins the image presented in the music video was that of a Black urban space with corner stores and Atlanta rap. Minnesota could not possibly fit into this social imagination for him. But the music video proves him wrong and causes him in a way to reconsider both images- that of Minnesota and that of the location of Black urban spaces. Although the purpose of my work is not to study socially imagined concepts of Minnesota, the point is that the reviewer called upon the trope of the Black urban space in the viewing of the music video. As I discussed above, in many ways the music video reaffirmed his perceptions because of the recognizable tropes such as the corner store, but it also caused him to slightly reconsider because of it coming from the larger space of Minnesota.
If the viewer is familiar with North Minneapolis, seeing the music video would probably cause them to tap into their existing vision of how they perceive North Minneapolis as a place. For example, a reviewer on YouTube who calls herself ‘blazeangelg’ commented in response to other reviewers making crude remarks about the kids in the music video, “These kids were given this opportunity by promising to stay out of trouble on the streets in North Minneapolis…What a good way to reward them and to give them a chance to better themselves…” (*Hot Cheetos and Takis*). This comment, while well-intended, actually continues the socially imagined concept of North Minneapolis as an urban space of crime, vice, and people who need to be bettered because they are flawed and therefore invaluable to society. Thus this comment illustrates how the music video simultaneously interrupts and reconstructs the socially imagined concepts of Black urban space. It is seen as a space of hope, which is a positive change, but is still seen as full of people who need to be improved by greater society.

One must consider the implications of this video representing North Minneapolis, while acknowledging that it operates differently depending on the individual’s prior knowledge of North Minneapolis. Deborah Karasov warns against the domination of media images of urban spaces: “For one thing, it has led to an impoverished understanding of the built environment, turning social space into a fetishized abstraction. We have reduced the space of lived experience to a system of visual stereotypes. And with this increasing emphasis on visual perception we have correspondingly reduced other forms of sensory perception, as well as memory” (qtd. in Vale and Warner 359). However, the music video was produced by individuals who actually identify as coming from North Minneapolis so is this actually an example of citizens identifying and
projecting their own images, which critic Patricia Philips describes as a way for them to gain “their own sense of the potential of places,” because if they do not do this themselves, “then someone or some organization will set the terms for the future for them” (qtd. in Vale and Warner 360). According to cultural theorist scholars, the kids in the music video would be considered “active participants in their own media experiences” (Berry 263). Due to the inherent questions of power and ideology in the media, there is a need to reframe the function of the media, especially in marginalized communities of color (Berry 263). Cultural critic Henry Giroux argues that, “there is a need to give the traditionally voiceless a voice, to allow them to affirm their own histories through the use of language, a set of social relations, and a body of knowledge that critically constructs and dignifies the cultural experiences that make up the tissue, texture, and history of their daily lives” (ctd. in Berry 263, 264). Although I agree with the sentiments of this argument, I push for a change in agency. Instead of giving and allowing this claiming of power through the media, I argue that many communities of color, such as the kids in “Hot Cheetos and Takis” achieve this, all on their own. Berry identifies rap music in particular as a genre that provides “a voice to the voiceless-young black men” because it “reflects and reaffirms an important lived experience in black culture- the urban experience” (264). Berry identifies in particular the value of rap as lying in its innovative nature which the artists of “Hot Cheetos and Takis” reflect, “Unlike many artists who simply sing songs that are written for them by others, rap artists write their own lyrics based on personal experience and cultural existence” (264).

However the other side of media is the reaction to it that the producers of the cultural text cannot necessarily control. As hooks argues, rap is a complicated form of culture that
can both be helpful and harmful to the African American community, “…even though a product like rap articulates narratives of coming to critical political consciousness, it also exploits stereotypes and essentialist notions of blackness…” (34). When rap is broadcasted to millions of viewers around the world, this becomes even more complicated. The negative comments about the youth in the music video demonstrate the paradoxical violence that is committed against young Black bodies, facilitated by the internet. hooks identifies black young bodies as being fetishized in the “psycho-sexual racial imagination of youth culture” which is a paradox because in reality these bodies are “daily viciously assaulted by white racist violence, black on black violence, the violence of overwork, and the violence of addiction and disease” (34). Although young and harmless, they are attached to the most negative parts of socially imagined concepts of Black urban space simply for being in the skin they are in and the place they inhabit. Many of the people who view the music video would never have interacted (figuratively) with the space of North Minneapolis if they hadn’t watched the video and probably will never physically enter it. But the viewing of it and their exposure to it afterwards through reviews, articles and commentators will forever shade how they view the space, in both positive and negative ways. The music video portrays a clearly marked Black urban space, and although not a physical experience, the physical space of North Minneapolis and socially imagined concepts of Black urban spaces are still profoundly impacted by how people perceive it. This was only made possible because it is a music video broadcasted on the internet that reached millions of people.
Conclusion

Tying the Three Sites Together

This work is meant to be circular, in that it ends exactly where it starts and could be initiated at any point. I begin by defining collective/socially imagined concepts of three specific neighborhoods, show how these concepts impact and play-out on three real examples of the neighborhoods through their consumption and, and examine if the process is a full circle in that these real spaces in turn continue to contribute to collective and socially imagined concepts of the tropes of these neighborhoods. I argue that the dual nature of consumption on the part of outsiders and an offer of consumption on the part of insiders is one of the reasons why certain paradoxes exist. Namely, these spaces are simultaneously both embraced and resisted, claimed and pushed away. This connects to the complicated notion of consumption itself and the superficial relationship that consumption requires the consumer to have with a space. One can consume without engaging and immediately there after exit the situation. Consumption requires no long-term contact and therefore is not as dangerous as an encounter with the Other could otherwise be (Huggan 24). A key point in consumption is the element of control. Because these spaces are far yet close, familiar yet foreign, they can be consumed when the consumer wants to because he/she has control over the situation.¹¹

As I focus on consumption throughout this work, it would be a huge oversight to overlook another overarching connection that exists between all three case studies: food.
Although my individual sites of analysis are not all focused around food, except for La Perla, all three communities that the sites of analysis are located in are extremely linked to the consumption of food. As I highlighted in Chapter two, many people’s only interactions with the South Side are through Mexican Restaurants, one of which is La Perla. In Chapter three I mention that part of Chicago’s Chinatown’s uniqueness comes from the fact that it is the only major Chinatown in the U.S. whose economy is primarily based off of the restaurant business. Continuing the discussion from Chapter four, the theme of the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis” focuses on these crunchy snacks. I wish to draw attention to the common theme of food and how it impacts the consumption of the sites. bell hooks’ analysis of Otherness being consumed like a food naturally leads to Otherness being consumed through space, especially in my case studies. As I demonstrate in all three sites of analysis, Otherness is consumed like a food, because consumption of the space is often first initiated due to a desire to consume material food. This food is desired because it is seen as more exotic, more exciting than “mainstream” dishes, as is the cultural identity that is associated with it. It is spicier, it is “offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (hooks 21). Mexican food, Chinese food, and the convenience store snacks hot cheetos and takis are relatively low-priced, considered fast, accessible, and convenient. Noticeably all also contain some sort of element of a spice that is new or unfamiliar or different to “mainstream” palates. This contact through the consumption of food is superficial and demands no extensive, sustained relationship, which denies the significance of the culinary tradition’s history and value (hooks 31). Thus, this is meaningless commodification (hooks 33). This “strips these signs of political integrity
and meaning, denying the possibility that they can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action” (hooks 33). Attempts at critical consciousness are weakened when they are commodified (hooks 33). Similarly, as I posited, through this consumption of food the space it is connected to is also consumed. This further displays the potentially harmful impacts of meaningless consumption on communities of color because a connection is often not made between the consumption of food, a process into which no thought is put, and its connection to its culinary roots and traditions.

Continuing the notion that the element of control is vital to consider in the consumption of all three sites, naturally questions of access also follow. Not only, as I highlight, do all three sites provide foods that are easy to access for outsiders to the community and thus easy to consume without much thought, but it is also important to consider if the members of the communities themselves have access to other foods besides the foods that I highlight in each site.12 This question was particularly salient in the examination of the community that produced “Hot Cheetos and Takis.” While many youtube comments critiqued the children for consuming such unhealthy snacks and linked them to stereotypical images of obese Black bodies in urban spaces, the fact that the kids chose to rap about the food that they did, does speak to what options they may have available to them, particularly in spaces such as Wally’s Corner store, which is shown in the music video. Alicia Johnson, a YMCA staff person involved with the production of the music video, highlighted this point in a Star Tribune article, “The song reflects the sad reality of kids in North Minneapolis, where many of the families can’t afford or don’t have access to fresher and more nutritious foods” (Riemenschneider).
Overall, I argue that the superficial consumption that occurred in each neighborhood site to different extents overall worked to perpetuate collective and socially imagined understandings of the three tropes: Latin@ Barrios, Chinatowns and Black Urban Spaces because the consumption of these sites was often done without much thought or intention. Although some interventions did occur, such as in Chinatown an attempt to also portray the gate as a symbol of the vibrant community and in the humanizing and positive responses to the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis,” overall the cycle was continued.

**Last Thoughts**

“Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson, 6).

The intent of my research was not to determine the authenticity of any neighborhood or ostracize individuals who contribute or participate in the collective process of socially-imagining certain spaces. The point was not to demonize those who eat at La Perla or encourage all to solemnly swear to never again enjoy crossing under the Chinatown Gate in Chicago or sing along to the music video “Hot Cheetos and Takis.”

Everyone does these individual acts or many more that are relatively equivalent on a daily basis. The issue is not that it is done but rather, how it is done. What mindset do we engage in when we consume these spaces and what are the implications of this? hooks argues that this is necessary because, “Exploring how desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different” is the only way we might someday achieve that desire to have contact with someone who is different
“can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance” (22).

A discourse critiquing the validity of an understanding of a neighborhood or the manifestation of this in cultural form is inherently limited because spaces are complex. Perhaps it would be more productive to instead see peoples’ interpretations of space as a social commentary of, “culture, history, social values, events, peoples, and places that is realized in architectural, material, and performative means” (Lukas 272). Thus the discourse become vastly more productive because it moves away from labeling interpretations with limiting labels such as “bad” or “wrong.”

“Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy. For it is the ever present reality of racist domination, of white supremacy, that renders problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other” (hooks 28). Does this mean that with every bite of Guacamole one must say to themselves, “I recognize the United State’s historical and present domination of Mexico”? Not necessarily. I argue that it means that we need to more closely examine the differences between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. As bell hooks points out, if we reframe the conversation to one where desire for contact with the other is not deemed “bad, politically incorrect, or wrong-minded, we can begin to conceptualize and identify ways that desire informs our political choices and affiliations” (39). By acknowledging and examining the ways our politics and understandings of difference are informed by desires for pleasure, “we may better
know how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible” (39). But a critical lens must always be applied to these new images.
NOTES

1. Naturally, this can also be problematic because one cannot assume inherently that Asian American means Chinese, but I will delve more into this in Chapter Three. I also further address the potential problematics of my labeling in my conclusion.

2. To clarify the terms that I use in my work, as it relates to “Latino,” I draw on Gina M. Pérez’s definition, “‘U.S. Latinos’ refers to persons of any Latin American origin living within the geographical boundaries of the United States.” Similar to Arlene Dávila, I also at times use the term “Latino” instead of the increasingly common gender-neutral option “Latin@.” I do this not to reproduce gender hierarchies, but rather, as Dávila models in her text, to draw attention to the prevalence in popular culture and the mainstream press to make “nationwide generalizations” and not to mark “differences in gender, race, ethnicity, and other variables” (7).

As it relates to the term ‘Barrio,’ I draw attention to Pérez, Guridy, and Burgos’ comments on page 5 on the use of this term,

While it is clear that race and class have shaped the livelihoods and residential patterns of Latinas/os and African Americans in U.S. cities, the analytic utility of the concepts “ghetto” and “barrio” is less clear, and they remain contested terms. Some scholars argue that these terms are often used as metaphors for social isolation, disorganization, and moral decay, and as such are powerful ways of conceptualizing- and by extension, pathologizing- Latina/o and African American communities. (5)

However, for many individuals involved with Latin@ Studies, “…the barrio remains a useful analytical tool for explaining the histories and contemporary realities of Latinas/os” because it holds a lasting importance as, “…a concept as well as a unit of
analysis” (4). They continue, “For some writers, el barrio is embraced and celebrated as a critical space nurturing cultural production, political mobilizations, and ethnic identity and solidarity. For others, concerns about criminalization, marginalization, and social dislocation inform research about barrio residents that is meant to contextualize their lives and communities” (Pérez, Guridy, Burgos 4). I use the term ‘Barrio’ in this work because of its prevalence as a label of a mostly Latin@ space and thus the social imagination that surrounds the use of the word. However I also wish to draw attention to how it is also a contested label.

3. I did not interview the Antons nor have I ever asked them any of the many questions I posed above because I did not utilize the method of interviews for this site of analysis. As I have already stated, the goals of my research are not to make definitive statements or judgments but rather to carry out a cultural analysis of representations of the site. The words of the Antons themselves in regards to their restaurant are insider portrayals to the space (although as I noted above, this notion is also very complicated), but they are through a mediated interview in an article, which I in fact also use as an outsider portrayal below.

4. There are also two other gates in the new Chinatown Square, a block north of the Chinatown gate that is my site of analysis. Here the two Chinese gates symbolize the entrance to the square and commercial retail area (see Figure 8). According to the Chamber of Commerce’s website, these “imposing” bronze gates represent “the four greatest Chinese inventions.” Although these two smaller gates are not the focus of my research, it is fascinating to compare these three gates and ponder how they fit into the
larger narrative of Chinatown in Chicago. All three gates represent the entrance to Chinatown- but in different places and for different time periods. While the older gate that I focus my research on represents the entrance to the historical Chinatown, the two newer gates represent the entrance to perhaps what can be seen as the future of Chinatown- more focused on newer immigrants and more catered towards the needs of an increasingly spread out Chinese and Chinese American community. Although the newer gates appear more modern and slightly less ornate and historical, it is interesting that they honor ancient Chinese traditions. They make no attempt to connect purely to the modern Chinese community. Instead, they honor and maintain a tie to ancient Chinese history. I have never seen these gates portrayed on any postcards or heavily photographed and shown on the internet. Perhaps they are less visible because they are newer, or perhaps because they fulfill less of the expected image of what a Chinatown gate should look like. Also, structurally-wise, the gates are placed to be seen less. While the main Chinatown gate was designed to be walked and driven through (because it sits at the entrance of the main commercial street), the gates marking the beginning of the Chinatown Square seem almost superfluous. They can be walked under but it is not necessary because they sit on an already large square where there is more than enough space to avoid having to walk under them. They could almost go unnoticed, which is perhaps the point. They may not be intended to attract large amounts of tourist attention if this area is designed more for members of the community than for tourists.
5. I will discuss these claims throughout the chapter.

6. It should also be problematized that I refer to the inside/back and outside/front of the gate without examining why I do this. While the inside/outside labels are clear (inside meaning the inside of the area that is the main business district of Chinatown), the front/back labels deserve more attention. Could the front of the gate actually be on the inside? Am I speaking from my perspective as an outsider to the space when I automatically label the front as the side facing the four-way main street and the subway stop, because this is the only direction I have ever crossed under the archway gate from? This is not a matter with a concrete answer. The nature of a gate means it can be approached from an indefinite number of angles and be crossed under in two directions. Determining what side of the gate should be labeled in what way depends on the perspective of the person, and thus highlights the gate’s function as a different symbol to
different people. This ambiguity in meaning speaks to how the gate overall serves as a complicated symbol of belonging to the community of Chinatown and representing a marker to the outside world coming in.

7. I could find no scholarly interpretations of the section of the essay that is referenced on the Chinatown gate, but my friend from the Guangdong Province in China explained to me how she viewed the gate. She expressed that she thought the purpose of putting such a line on the gate was to encourage the Chinese in Chicago to unite together selflessly and help each other. She also connected the line to the idea of the American Dream as held by Chinese immigrants. She expressed that she felt that the line on the gate demonstrated a hope by the Chinese community to be welcomed into the U.S. because as the gate expresses, the world is a united community and therefore they helped to develop the U.S. along with other Americans. Granted, this is only her interpretation and she is not a member of Chicago’s Chinatown community nor was involved in the designing of the gate, but her perspective is nonetheless very interesting. Another interpretation could be that it supports an idea of Chinatown as a family that is formed on kinship and not rooted in biology.

8. This translation is according to my same friend from the Guangdong Province. I could find no exact translation published from any official sources.

9. The rhyme patterns mean the rhythms of the words while the hook is basically the chorus of the song, or the catchy part that most people remember when somebody mentions the name of it.
10. The flow in rap music means more or less how the rhythms and rhymes of the lyrics interact.

11. An important side digression: Particularly in my case studies of Chinatown in Chicago and the South Side of Milwaukee, the concept of transnational migration is vital. Processes of transnational migration helped form both Chinatowns and Latin@ Barrios in a U.S. context. Thus the ideas and physical spaces of these types of neighborhoods also embody what scholar of Asian American Studies Kandice Chuh calls the “transnational imaginary” that reflect the “push and pull of the national and extranational” that structure Asian American enclaves and Latin@ Barrios (qtd. in Chang 9). Author Chang explores purely Asian American spaces in her text Writing the Ghetto, but as a result of my research I argue that in some regards, the space of the Latino Barri@ operates in a similar way. Chang argues that Chinatowns are, “Often described as foreign cities within American cities” but are nonetheless “claimed as national landmarks and icons of the American urban landscape” (10). Chang continues this paradox by pointing out that while Asian American spaces are often created to manage and contain “Asian American foreignness,” they are also often “located within the heart of American cities” (10). This also demonstrates the concept of far yet close, familiar yet foreign that facilitates a superficial consumption of these spaces which denies the voice of any insiders.

12. Future research on this topic should also consider the issue of food justice and how this impacts the consumption of these spaces.
WORKS CITED


