

Contested Sidewalks:  
Street Vending, Digital Technologies, and Racial Capitalism in Los Angeles

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation explores how street vendors in Los Angeles experience processes of racial capitalism through their everyday interactions with digital technologies. Street vending is one of the most visible manifestations of informal labor across the world, largely due to it occurring in public space, and therefore it raises questions of who has a right to public space in the city, for what, and under what conditions. Since the formalization of vending in Los Angeles in 2018, street vendors and their allies have been constantly navigating these questions, working against negative perceptions of them, and articulating their right to live and work in the city. Using data from a variety of sources, including digital ethnography, participant observation, and interviews, I explore the ways that the digital is implicated in the lives of vendors under racial capitalism, including both how it can be used to reproduce existing uneven social and spatial relations, but also it can serve as a tool for resisting the domination of racial capitalism. This investigation of the digital and vending includes not only how vendors use it in their daily operations, but also

how organizers and activists use it to combat violence against vendors, create coalitions around vendor politics, and articulate vendors' place in the city. This work also analyzes the policies, practices, and frameworks of urban governance that condition the daily lives of vendors, including how these frameworks produce various forms of differentiation not only between vendors and non-vendors, but within vending communities themselves. It also examines how these forms of differentiation and exclusion are operationalized in service of the production of neoliberal cities, as well as how police and other enforcement agents control and manage both the processes and effects of this exclusionary urbanism. Finally, it begins to think about the what can be built out of the politics of the street vendor movement, including not only imagining new urban futures, but generating a broader global politics that coalesces around these urban imaginaries. How are vendors and vendor activists already enacting a transformative and liberatory political project that, while grounded in the conditions of vending in LA, also holds the potential for connecting with other movements across space. This dissertation brings together theories of racial capitalism, including work on the conditions of labor, immigration, and informality, urban geography, and digital geographies to analyze the socialities and spatialities being produced through the digital within the street vendor movement in LA, locating in them the potential for resistance to, and transcendence beyond, the domination of global racial capitalism.

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# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgements

## Table of Contents

## List of Acronyms

|                                                                                             |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Chapter 1. Introduction.....</b>                                                         | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1 Sustaining Life Under Racial Capitalism: Street Vending in the Global North.....        | 3         |
| 1.2 Why Los Angeles?.....                                                                   | 6         |
| 1.3 A Brief History of Street Vending in LA.....                                            | 9         |
| 1.4 The Battle to Legalize Street Vending in California.....                                | 18        |
| 1.5 Structure of the Dissertation.....                                                      | 22        |
| <b>Chapter 2. Literature Review.....</b>                                                    | <b>28</b> |
| 2.1 Racial Capitalism.....                                                                  | 28        |
| 2.1.1 Immigration and Bordering.....                                                        | 32        |
| 2.1.2 Labor.....                                                                            | 35        |
| 2.1.3 Theories of Informality.....                                                          | 37        |
| 2.1.4 The Current State of the Informal Economy.....                                        | 41        |
| 2.2 Urban Politics of Informal Labor.....                                                   | 44        |
| 2.3 Public Space.....                                                                       | 46        |
| 2.4 Digital Geographies.....                                                                | 49        |
| 2.4.1 The Digital and the Production of Difference.....                                     | 52        |
| 2.4.2. Digital Politics and Activism.....                                                   | 54        |
| 2.4 Conclusion.....                                                                         | 56        |
| <b>Chapter 3. Methodology.....</b>                                                          | <b>58</b> |
| 3.1 Research Design and Evidence.....                                                       | 58        |
| 3.1.1 Digital Ethnography.....                                                              | 60        |
| 3.1.2 Participant Observation.....                                                          | 63        |
| 3.1.3 Semi-Structured Interviews.....                                                       | 65        |
| 3.1.4 Archival Research.....                                                                | 66        |
| 3.2 Analysis.....                                                                           | 67        |
| 3.3 Positionality, Limitations, and Unforeseen Events.....                                  | 68        |
| <b>Chapter 4. Navigating Life Under Racial Capitalism Through Digital Technologies.....</b> | <b>71</b> |
| 4.1 Digital Technologies and Street Vending Practices.....                                  | 76        |
| 4.1.1 “Do You Have Zelle?” Digital Payment Systems and Street Vending.....                  | 77        |
| 4.1.2 Digital Administration Practices.....                                                 | 84        |
| 4.1.3 Digital Marketing and Digital Placemaking.....                                        | 90        |
| 4.2 Digital Technologies and Vendor Organizing.....                                         | 92        |

|                                                                                                                    |            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 4.2.1 WhatsApp-ening: Digitally Communicating with Vendors.....                                                    | 92         |
| 4.2.2 Digitally Building and Growing the Movement.....                                                             | 98         |
| 4.3 Digital Technologies and Online Vendor Activism.....                                                           | 100        |
| 4.3.1 Eyes on the Street: Recording Violence Against Vendors.....                                                  | 100        |
| 4.3.2 Doing Activism Within Commodified Digital Space.....                                                         | 109        |
| 4.3.3 “Clickbait for Cash:” The Digital Activism of the Justice 8.....                                             | 118        |
| 4.4 Conclusion.....                                                                                                | 124        |
| <b>Chapter 5. Vending in the Neoliberal City: Socialities and Spatialities of Control.....</b>                     | <b>127</b> |
| 5.1 “You’re the Criminal:” Perceptions of Vendors in the Neoliberal City.....                                      | 128        |
| 5.2 Street Vending and Immigration: The Experience of Migrant Vendors in the City.....                             | 132        |
| 5.2.1 From the Pueblo to Hollywood Boulevard: Street Vending<br>and Latino Culture in LA .....                     | 133        |
| 5.2.2 “LA Looks Like the Third World With a Bunch of Street Vendors”<br>Racialized Anti-Vendor Urban Politics..... | 135        |
| 5.3 Is an Inclusive Economy Possible Under Racial Capitalism? Tensions Within<br>Urban Vending Politics.....       | 138        |
| 5.4 Street Vending and the Production of Difference Through Urban Governance.....                                  | 143        |
| 5.4.1 Differentiation and Permits: Who Can Afford to Work?.....                                                    | 143        |
| 5.4.2 The Spatial Unevenness of Vending Ordinances.....                                                            | 146        |
| 5.5 Enforcing Street Vending in the City.....                                                                      | 149        |
| 5.5.1 Street Justice: Vendors, Violence, and Policing.....                                                         | 150        |
| 5.5.2 Who Keeps Our Streets Safe? Interrogating the Role of Police in Cities.....                                  | 153        |
| 5.5.3 Where Does the Border End? Urban Policing as Immigration Enforcement.....                                    | 156        |
| 5.6 Conclusion.....                                                                                                | 160        |
| <b>Chapter 6. Building New Urban Futures Through Digital Street Vendor Politics.....</b>                           | <b>162</b> |
| 6.1 Complicating Vendor Politics: Tensions and Issues Internal and External to the<br>Movement.....                | 163        |
| 6.1.1 Conflict or Cooperation? Political Ideologies Within the Vendor Movement.....                                | 163        |
| 6.1.2 The Difficulty of Operating Under Hegemonic Racial Capitalism .....                                          | 167        |
| 6.1.3 Capture by Capital? Accumulation by Dispossession and Street Vending.....                                    | 170        |
| 6.2 What Kinds of Worlds do Vending Politics Imagine?.....                                                         | 172        |
| 6.2.1 Public Spaces for the Public Good: Vending and the Right to Streets,<br>Sidewalks, and Parks.....            | 173        |
| 6.2.2. Working in the City: Connecting Urban Formal and Informal Labor.....                                        | 177        |
| 6.2.3 “The More We Unite, the Stronger we Become:” Street Vending Politics<br>and Creating Anti-Racist Cities..... | 179        |
| 6.3 #ProtectStreetVendors: Building a Global Movement for Social Justice Through<br>Street Vendor Politics.....    | 182        |
| 6.4 Conclusion.....                                                                                                | 191        |

|                                           |            |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Chapter 7: Conclusion.....</b>         | <b>194</b> |
| 7.1 Contributions to Geography.....       | 198        |
| 7.2 Potential Areas for Future Study..... | 201        |
| <b>Bibliography.....</b>                  | <b>203</b> |

## List of Acronyms

|       |                                           |
|-------|-------------------------------------------|
| AVA   | Asociación de Vendedores Ambulantes       |
| BTRC  | Business Tax Registration Certificate     |
| CMFO  | Compact Mobile Food Operation             |
| CPC   | Community Power Collective                |
| ELACC | East LA Community Corporation             |
| ICE   | Immigration and Customs Enforcement       |
| ILO   | International Labor Organization          |
| ITIN  | Individual Taxpayer Identification Number |
| LA    | Los Angeles                               |
| LAPD  | Los Angeles Police Department             |
| LURN  | Leadership for Urban Renewal Network      |
| MEHKO | Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operation    |
| SSN   | Social Security Number                    |

## Chapter 1. Introduction

On a normal day in 2012, “Cecilia,”<sup>1</sup> a street vendor in Los Angeles, set up her cart and merchandise in Exposition Park, near the Museum of Natural History. The area surrounding the museum was, and remains, a lucrative vending location due to the large number of school field trips that frequent the museum during the school year. Although vending was illegal in LA at the time, street vendors like Cecilia continued to operate in public spaces throughout the city due to a lack of money and formal job opportunities. Cecilia had also been vending since she was an eight-year-old living in Mexico, following in the footsteps of her mother and aunts, who themselves were vendors. Although Cecilia was cautious about vending in the area due to a heightened police presence, she knew that it was necessary in order to support her family, including her two small children.

Unfortunately, while she was vending in the park, a local police officer recognized her from previous interactions, and approached her. Although Cecilia attempted to evade the police officer and hide, he followed her throughout the park, and eventually began confiscating her merchandise, while radioing other officers for backup. During that call, he claimed that Cecilia had assaulted him. As a result, backup rushed to the scene and arrested Cecilia, despite her desperate pleas that the officer was lying and she did not assault him. Once at the station, Cecilia was denied bail because of previous warnings against vending and was forced to remain in custody. After a short period of time, her family attempted once again to bail her out, but they were informed that she had been fingerprinted and was now on hold for immigration. That same day, she was transferred by bus to a holding facility in El Paso, Texas, over 800 miles away.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym

During this entire process, Cecilia was never told why she had been picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), or how long she would be held in El Paso. However, it subsequently became clear that it was a direct result of the assault claim made by the police officer—rather than merely getting a ticket and administrative fine, her violation became a criminal offense. In one day, Cecilia had been arrested under false pretenses, detained without bail, forcibly abducted over 800 miles from her home, and held without charges indefinitely all because she was selling candy and toys to children on school field trips.

Luckily, Cecilia, unlike so many other vendors, was ultimately released and was able to return home to her family, but the traumatic aftereffects of the injustice done to her remained. However, even though she was now terrified to continue vending, she knew she had to in order to ensure her family's survival, as she was the primary breadwinner of the family at the time. Adding to her fear was the fact that the same officer that had falsely accused her was still operating in the area, meaning that not only did she have to be constantly vigilant in order to avoid him, but also every time she saw him, she was reminded of her traumatic experience. To this day, Cecilia still vends in the same park, but it was only after vending was finally decriminalized in 2018 that she was finally able to work largely without the fear of arrest or detention.

Cecilia's story represents a grave injustice, but is unfortunately not unique for vendors in LA. Although street vendors have long been a critical and valuable part of public life in the city, vending in public was illegal in LA until 2018. As a result, before 2018, vendors in LA were constantly harassed and persecuted by local law enforcement, with many, like Cecilia, becoming victims of a larger carceral system designed to oppress and punish poor, vulnerable populations, including immigrants.

## **1.1 Sustaining Life Under Racial Capitalism: Street Vending in the Global North**

This dissertation will examine the conditions of street vending in Los Angeles, exploring how street vendors experience and navigate processes of racial capitalism through their everyday relations with digital technologies. It will also investigate the relationship between urban governance and street vending, including regulatory frameworks and policing, and the ways in which these are used to promote particular perceptions of vendors, and control narratives on who belongs in the city and who does not. Finally, it will also discuss and analyze street vendor advocacy and activism, placing the street vendor movement in LA within a larger context of urban politics from below, and connecting it with political movements across space and time. Bringing these three threads together, this dissertation is an investigation into the intersections between the digital, urban street vending and vending advocacy. What are the digital mediations surrounding street vending, and what are the social and spatial relationships that they animate? Street vendors in Los Angeles have long been subject to carceral urban racial capitalism, including processes of differentiation, criminalization, exclusion, and enclosure. How do vendors and vendor advocates not only work within this paradigm, but also resist it, and how are these actions promoted or hindered by digital technologies?

My project also works to challenge the binary conception of global North and South as distinctly different and therefore conceptually separate. The growth of global capitalism, along with the slow decline and fracturing of states in the global North both economically and politically has begun to expose the similarities between the core and the periphery. Within global North states, growing inequality and marginalization has led to conditions in the North seemingly developing to resemble those in the South, rather than vice-versa. Although this

socioeconomic differentiation is not new, with the existence and success of Western states being reliant on division based on various factors, including race, gender and class (Du Bois, 1999, Robinson, 2021), for a time under the neoliberal consensus, it was framed as a dying phenomenon. However, contrary to the work of neoliberal theorists, rather than states in the global South developing into mirror images of states in the global North, the opposite seems to be true as evidenced by growing labor precaritization and casualization, criminalization and bordering, political violence, and the ongoing repression of marginalized communities in Western states (Trefzer, Jackson, & McKee, 2014). This is particularly true of labor, particularly informal or casual labor. Labor globally, including in the North, is becoming more flexible, more precarious, and more informal. Rather than shrinking and eventually disappearing (the development path traditionally theorized by development economists), informality is instead growing— today, two billion people, or over 61 percent of the global employed population, are involved in the informal economy (ILO, 2018). Moreover, it is not only growing but is also appearing in new places and forms, including the rise of gig labor like Uber, Postmates, and Instacart as a replacement for falling social reproductive capacities. The emergence of these new forms of informal work is part of a larger trend of increasing precaritization of labor globally, but especially in the global North.

Although there is a growing body of literature on street vending in the global North, including the United States (Devlin, 2011, 2019; Martin, 2014; Munoz, 2008, 2016; Schoenecker, 2026;), much of the analysis is still centered on cities and workers in the global South (Recchi, 2021; Rosaldo, 2021). This is largely due to the fact that informal labor generally often makes up a larger share of the economy in global South countries compared with global North countries, where it is largely viewed as marginal and secondary to the formal economy, as

well as a survival tactic. Therefore, there is a need for research on the conditions of informal labor, including street vending, in the global North. Moreover, Devlin (2019) has argued that in analyzing informality in the North, one must differentiate between “informality of desire,” or “practices that break rules regulating space for the purpose of convenience, entertainment, efficiency, or in service to a specific ideological project,” and “informality of need” or “practices undertaken by lower income residents that break rules in order to fulfill basic needs like income generation or housing” (Devlin, 2019, p.122). For street vending, we can point to the rise of gourmet food truck entrepreneurs, who are largely white, native-born, culinary-school trained chefs, as an example of informality of desire, as opposed to generally poorer, non-white, immigrant vendors, who are an example of informality of need (Martin, 2014). This distinction is theoretically important not only because it allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics surrounding informal food sales, but also because, as Devlin (2019) explains, there is a focus on informality of desire in literature about food vending in the North, meaning that informality of need, typically undertaken by the urban poor, has been undertheorized. Therefore, this dissertation will focus on vendors operating out of informality of need in the global North.

Moreover, although this analysis is centered on LA, the conditions faced by street vendors and the everyday actions they take to navigate these conditions provide an opportunity to study urban life more generally. Street vendors represent some of the most vulnerable people in cities across the world and thus can serve as a sort of canary in the coal mine, revealing the past, current, and potential futures of urban politics and life. From this study, I aim to connect experiences of street vending in the US with conditions faced by urban populations globally, including growing labor precarity, the enclosure of public space, criminalization, and bordering, showing how manifestations of racial capitalism are both place specific, and intrinsically tied to

global processes. Moreover, it illustrates the ways in which urban populations can not only survive, but thrive, in the neoliberal city under global racial capitalism, showcasing potential paths forward for liberatory urban politics.

## **1.2 Why Los Angeles?**

Studying street vending in Los Angeles allows for an analysis of a city in which street vendors have long served as a cultural symbol of the city, while simultaneously operating illegally and within a milieu of oppression, criminalization, and fear. The recent legalization of vending presents a unique opportunity to study a city which is undergoing and navigating changes that will hopefully lead to a more equitable and just city for vendors. It also provides an opportunity to study the contestations and negotiations around street vending as they are developed and worked through on the ground.

Los Angeles itself serves as a unique and valuable city to ground this research within. From its place at the heart of the frontier imagination, to its role in the rise of the aerospace industry, to its current framing as a multicultural melting pot, Los Angeles has captured the imaginations of many writers and academics. It has also long served as a symbol of an imagined future for the US, and the world, a kind of urban destiny that makes utopian futures seem close enough to grasp. As early as the 1850s, writers were describing LA as a city destined to become the greatest in the world. One writer called Los Angeles “The City of Destiny,” describing it as “the old new land of promise” (McGroarty, 1920, as cited in Deverell, 2004, p.19). As the city grew, it maintained this perception of it as a crystal ball into possible urban futures. In the 1970s, the Los Angeles campus of the University of California even hosted an academic symposium titled “Los Angeles: Metropolis of the Future?” While the question mark implies uncertainty, for

many, this claim was undeniable. As Deverell writes “The future belonged to Los Angeles, the future *was* Los Angeles. Or so presumption promised” (2004, p. 20) In other words, to ascertain the future of not only the US, but the world, one only had to look to LA. Moreover, crucially, this future was an international one. As Pubols (2010) observes “Los Angeles was born a global city” (p. 21).

This framing of LA as not only a city of the future, but as a city that can illuminate the future, has continued to this day. LA has both historically and contemporarily served as a rich case study for urban geography, and for critical analysis more generally. One of the most influential works on the history and geography of Los Angeles, *City of Quartz* by Mike Davis is even subtitled “Excavating the Future in Los Angeles” (2018). This book was also part of a new critical academic movement that challenged the dominance of the “Chicago School” in urban geography called the “LA School,” within which urban geographers including Soja (1989, 1996) and Dear (1997, 2002) framed the city as a postmodern “prototype of future urban development” (Dear, 1997).

Since the 1990s, analysis of LA has often included an understanding of the racial, ethnic, and class-based dynamics that fueled much of the history of the city, and the ways in which those relations continue to structure the modern city of LA (Lytel Hernández, 2017; Molina, 2006; Pulido, 2002; Sánchez, 1993). It also often serves as a lens into the workings of global racial capitalism, allowing for an understanding of how capital moves throughout and beyond the city, and the ways in which this creates and molds the city. As Scott and Soja (1997) write, it is a “particularly revealing place from which to understand and interpret global phenomena of urbanization and regional development in relation to broadly based transformations of contemporary capitalist society” (p. 2-3). In contrast to the earlier boosters and idealistic

commentators, much analysis of LA today focuses critically on the negative effects of capital on the city and its people, including the current housing crisis, gentrification and enclosure of the city, and vast spatial and social inequality. As Mike Davis writes in *City of Quartz*, LA “has come to play the double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism” (2018, p. 15).

Los Angeles has also become one of the epicenters of the current struggle between the state, as represented by ICE and local police, and immigrant communities. Following the election of Trump in 2024, violent and often indiscriminate raids against migrant communities in LA have created a city marked by injustice and fear (Human Rights Watch, 2025). These new immigration and deportation directives have had a huge impact on street vendors and their families, most of whom are non-white immigrants. Moreover, because they often operate outside, in public space, vendors are particularly threatened by ICE, who have a history of kidnapping and detaining random non-white people in public places, even without specific directives to do so. Because of this, many vendors have been unable to work or make money, leading to economic challenges for them and their families. There has also been a significant reduction in foot traffic in many of the neighborhoods vendors operate in, leading to a reduction in customers and therefore profits for vendors (Recinos, 2025). The presence and importance of all immigrants, including vendors, in LA must be noted in any analysis of the city and its people. Overall, LA lies at a nexus of state repression, spatial and social inequality, and utopian urban futures built on and around capital accumulation, making it a rich space in which to ground research on street vending.

### 1.3 A Brief History of Street Vending in LA

*“Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash”*

Morrow Mayo, *Los Angeles*, 1933, p. 319

For decades, street vendors have been a crucial part of the promotion of Los Angeles. The rainbow-colored umbrellas of the *fruteros* against the backdrop of large, paved boulevards and palm trees have long visually represented LA as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic paradise where small-scale entrepreneurs can thrive. This imagery has explicitly been used by the city to sell an idealized imaginary of a diverse and welcoming city, with the rainbow umbrellas signifying a “rainbow coalition future” (Deverell, 2004, p. 22). However, the use of street vendors to promote and sell LA as a multicultural city has historically been in direct opposition to the actual street vending politics of LA. Contrary to this idyllic scene, street vending was illegal in LA until 2018, leading to a city where boosters profited off of the informal labor of the very populations they oppress.

Similar to many cities across the world, street vending has had a long and contentious history in Los Angeles. Within that history, two main periods of conflict around vending and vendors can be identified—one in the late 19<sup>th</sup> through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the other in the 1980s. Although vending existed between and outside of those time periods, these years represent times when vending was at its peak, and thus conflict around vending was also heightened.

As in many other cities in the US like New York, the origins of vending in Los Angeles can be traced to influxes of immigrants into the city, with vending becoming a common occurrence by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, the streets of LA were populated by vegetable vendors, who walked the streets with baskets attached to poles, fruit vendors who operated out of horse drawn wagons, produce, meat, and fish vendors who pushed around small carts, lunch carts which sold popcorn, sandwiches, candy, and drinks to workers, as well as a variety of stationary stands including news, cigar, and bootblack stands, which served as important social hubs for Los Angelinos. In addition to these largely mobile vendors, there were also established street markets which sold produce, meat, fish, and other goods (Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007).

Although convenient and financially beneficial for vendors and customers alike, street vending at the time was contentious, and subject to various attempts to control or curtail it by the city. Many times, these efforts were aimed not directly at street vending, but at the vendors themselves. Like today, in the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century many street vendors (then called street peddlers) were poor immigrants. One prominent group in LA was Chinese vegetable vendors, who were highly visible in the city, and successful due in part to the favorable growing conditions in southern California, as well as the rise of successful Chinese-American small-scale farmers. By 1880, 50 out of the 60 registered vegetable peddlers in LA were Chinese, and by 1894, there were over 100 licensed Chinese vegetable wagons (Fickle, 2010).

Many of these vendors were former railroad workers and their families, who migrated west to California following the completion of the Transatlantic Railroad in 1869 (Fickle, 2010). These vendors were part of the growing Chinese population in LA, and California more

generally—by 1860 nearly 35,000 Chinese immigrants lived in California, becoming the largest non-white population in the state. The population continued to rise throughout the latter half of the 1800s, and by 1880, there were over 75,000 Chinese immigrants in the US, with the vast majority in the western states, including California (Lytel Hernández, 2017, p. 66). In order to maintain their territorial and political dominance in the west, white settlers not only passed exclusionary laws, but also pursued what has been called a “reign of terror” and “litany of hate” against Chinese immigrants, including setting fire to their homes and businesses, organizing posses to drive them out of town, and physically attacking and murdering them (Pfaelzer, 2007, p. 67). Due to its high concentration of Chinese migrants, California, and LA more specifically, was often at the epicenter of this violence—one of the deadliest massacres occurred in LA in 1871, when rioters, including the district attorney, county sheriff, and mayor, murdered at least 18 Chinese people (Lytel Hernández, 2017).

This anti-Chinese racism eventually spread nationwide, partially fueled by the Panic of 1873, leading to the nationwide Chinese exclusionist movement of the 1870s and 1880s (Lytel Hernández, 2017). This reactionary movement eventually led to a number of exclusionary, anti-immigrant laws designed to curtail Chinese immigration into the US, including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement, and the 1924 Immigration Act (Estrada, 2019). The movement also reached the local level in many cities across the country, including LA, with its large population of Chinese labor migrants. During this time, city officials sought to regulate industries dominated by Chinese migrants, including laundries, day labor, and street vending. They began to require licenses for street vendors in 1876, leading Chinese vegetable peddlers to go on strike in 1878. Because these vendors represented such a large portion of produce sales in the city, the vendors were largely successful in their protest, and city

officials were forced to lower license fees to \$3. However, in response to the growing Sinophobia of the Chinese exclusionist movement, two years later the fees were raised to \$20. In the years that followed, there continued to be conflict between the vendors and anti-Chinese exclusionists in the city regarding the licensing fees, with many vendors simply refusing to pay the fees. The city also addressed the anti-vendor opposition, which included not only Chinese exclusionists but also local merchants in competition with street vendors, in other ways, including enacting ordinances that prevented vendors from standing in the street, limited the amount of time a vendor could interact with a customer to three minutes, and outright prohibited vending in certain parts of the city in downtown LA (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009).

Conflicts between groups opposing vending, consisting mainly of LA shopkeepers and anti-Chinese factions, and vendors continued into the late 1800s and the turn of the century. Contention over vending involved a heterogeneous mix of people and groups, especially on the pro-vendor side. Nationwide Sinophobia aside, local public sentiment was largely on the side of the vendors, especially from middle-class consumers, who were able to take advantage of the cheaper prices offered by vendors, and who loudly demanded the repeal of the monthly licensing fees. The normally pro-business *LA Times* called the restrictions “obnoxious class-legislation,” and local groups including the Parent-Teacher Association of Lorena Street and the Women’s Alliance called for the repeal of licensing fees altogether (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009, p. 118).

It is important to note that while all vendors were subject to some form of restriction or rent-seeking, these ordinances were not uniformly applied to all vendors. For example, in 1897, the city imposed a licensing fee of \$50 per month on meat vendors, a price which highly exceeded other vending fees, which ranged from \$1-\$5. Moreover, vendors were banned from

specific locations based on what they sold, with fruit peddling being banned outright in parts of downtown in 1893. While much of this differentiation can be traced to specific city lobbying groups being more or less vocal about vendors, anti-Chinese sentiments also played a part, especially in the constantly fluctuating monthly fees levied on the largely Chinese vegetable peddlers, which was part of an explicit move to forcibly displace Chinese-Americans in the area. However, enforcement was low, and many vendors ignored or got around the restrictions (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009).

In an attempt to “solve” the street vending issue by enclosing and controlling it, the city opened a public street market in 1890. This allowed the city to not only begin to clear the streets of vending, but also to extract rents from vendors, remove competition for shopkeepers, ensure continued access to fresh and quality produce, and begin to build out an organized local market for regional produce. It also served to appease middle-class consumers and other LA residents, who were far less interested in vendor’s rights than they were in being able to access cheap products. Although shopkeepers continued to oppose the markets on the basis that they stole consumers away, the market became very popular, and eventually markets proliferated across the city, becoming an LA staple for decades to come. However, although many vendors were able to rent stalls in the markets, due to the popularity and expansion of the public market system, street vending itself became far more marginal than it had been in the decades prior, especially grocery vending, culminating in a total ban of vendors selling “fruit, vegetables, eggs, chickens, or other fowls, or any farm or country produce” in the 1910s (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009, p. 137). Other forms of vending, including lunch carts and snack wagons selling lemonade, popcorn, and candy, were not included in the markets, and these vendors continued to sell their

products on the streets, albeit under continuously changing regulations and restrictions that made their jobs increasingly precarious.

Following the creation of the market system, street vending remained a marginal activity in LA for much of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because of this, the limited number of street vendors that remained were subject to a lower level of enforcement from the city compared to earlier years when vending proliferated. Los Angeles also saw a rise in formal employment opportunities for immigrant workers, including in agriculture, mining, and construction. This cheap labor served as the backbone for the economic industrial expansion, meaning that informal jobs like street vending were not a common or popular economic solution for migrants (Estrada, 2019).

One other major difference in the early 1900s was the nationality of these immigrant workers. In response to the Chinese exclusionary movement discussed above, which severely limited the amount of Chinese labor in the nation, as well as the industrial expansion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, US employers and factory owners began to recruit workers from Mexico to replace Asian workers. This new, cheap labor force was so integral to US industrialization that US capitalists fought for, and won, an exemption for Mexican workers in the Immigration Act of 1924. These recruitment efforts continued through the turn of the century until the late 1920s, with US employers utilizing *enganchadores* (labor recruiters) to bring in cheap labor. During World War 2, Mexican labor was once again aggressively recruited by US manufacturers through the Bracero Program, which helped facilitate the economic and industrial boom during the war. This program continued through the 1960s (Estrada, 2019).

During this time, street vending by Mexican migrants was minimal due to the significant number of formal jobs available in manufacturing. Cheap labor from Mexico was so integral to US employers that even laws intended to curtail migration beginning in the mid 1960s were unable to stop the flow of labor migrants due to high demand from US employers, especially in the agricultural field, as well as established social networks of Mexican workers. However, these new restrictive immigration laws did result in an increase of undocumented Mexican workers, leading to the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which sought to limit the number of undocumented workers by imposing more stringent hiring restrictions on employers. Because of this, formal employment began to be unattainable for many Mexican migrants, leading to the growth of informal labor, including street vending (Estrada, 2019).

Because of this growth of the informal sector, by the 1970s and 1980s, street vending had become commonplace in LA, especially in Latino neighborhoods. The decline of manufacturing in southern California, and the closing of large plants, also led many Latino migrants, many of whom were unskilled, to turn to street vending (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009). These vendors were not only Mexican, but also Central American migrants, many of whom were fleeing economic and political violence facilitated, and often directly caused by, US foreign policy. By 1991, there were between three and six thousand street vendors in LA, of whom two-thirds were Mexican and Central American (Estrada, 2019).

These new vending populations soon came into conflict with local authorities, as well as community members and organizations in quickly gentrifying LA. City officials sought to curb and control vending by reintroducing old vending ordinances, which ultimately became some of the strictest in the nation. For example, one ordinance stipulated that

No person . . . shall on any sidewalk or street offer for sale, solicit sale of, announce by any means the availability of, or have in his or her possession, control or custody, whether upon his or her person or upon some other animate or inanimate object, any goods, wares, or merchandise which the public may purchase at any time. (Regulation of Soliciting and Sales in Streets, 1994)

Under these laws, street vending was considered a misdemeanor crime, subject to up to \$1000 in fines and six months in jail. To enforce the law, the city would periodically raid commercial areas and vending hotspots, confiscating merchandise, issuing citations, and arresting vendors. The persecution of vendors by the city was substantial, with the *Los Angeles Times* estimating that around 2,700 vendors were arrested in 1990 alone (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009).

In response to these crackdowns, vendors fought back against the city and began organizing. The *Asociación de Vendedores Ambulantes* (Street Vendors Association or AVA) was formed in 1986 and sought to not only help and protect vendors who had been victims of police persecution, but also to lobby the city for the legalization of vending in public spaces. The AVA documented arrests and harassment of vendors, paid fines for vendors, found them legal representation when necessary, and advocated for arrested vendors to local police and city officials. They also campaigned for the rights of vendors more generally, publishing op-eds in local newspapers, meeting with city officials, and holding organizing meetings with vendors to build solidarity and political consciousness. The network created by the AVA was vast and varied—in addition to vendors and vendor advocates, they engaged the support of unions, churches, other non-profits, and local institutions of higher education. The coalition was also multi-ethnic and crossed class divisions—one crucial ally to the movement was the so-called “women of conscience,” white, middle-class women, many of whom were religious. Many of these women came to work with vendors through their interest in US foreign policy in Central America, including El Salvador, and the effects of the ensuing violence on women. These early

advocates had been helping vendors independently, and joined with vendors, legal aid lawyers, and other allies to form the association, bringing together work that had previously been done independently and without a larger organizing structure. The AVA also collaborated with the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and the newly founded Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) to advocate for vendors to the city (AVA Oral History, n.d.)

These efforts proved successful when, in 1989, the Los Angeles City Council formed the Task Force on Street Vending to examine the state of street vending in the city and suggest regulatory measures for it. Continued pressure from the coalition and their allies eventually led the city to create vending districts along eight major commercial corridors. However, due to lobbying from local business interests, the process for creating these districts was overly arduous and complicated, and included the written endorsement of at least 20% of all local businesses and residents, the review of a Community Advisory Committee, and a hearing and vote by the city council (Board of Public Works, n.d.). It also required vendors who wished to sell in the vending districts to secure the written permission of the business closest to their vending area, to only utilize carts approved by the city, and to obtain liability insurance, a Business Tax Registration Certificate, a seller's permit from the state, and annual vending permit from the city, and health permits from the Department of Health Services (Board of Public Works, n.d.). In total, the required permits and licenses, as well as the purchase of an approved cart, could cost a vendor up to \$5000, which was far out of reach of most vendors (Simon, 1995). Vendors who were able to obtain the necessary documents and equipment, and gain access to a vending zone, were required to be stationary, and were not allowed to move, could only sell specific goods approved by the city, and had to display their permits on their carts at all times. As a result of these onerous and costly requirements, over the twelve years that the program was in effect, only

one vending district was established in MacArthur Park. Due to a lack of public support and vendor participation, as well as safety concerns, including increased violence against vendors, the MacArthur Park Vending District was ultimately dissolved in 2007. (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009).

Despite their successful campaign to raise awareness about the conditions faced by vendors, and to legalize vending in parts of the city, the *Asociación de Vendedores Ambulantes* also disbanded in the mid 1990s. The details surrounding the breakup of the organization are complex but include internal power struggles between various board members and staff and political disagreements on where to focus the energy of the organization (Duren, n.d.). As a result, vending advocacy once again became a piecemeal process, with some organizations including CARECEN and CHIRLA continuing to help vendors, albeit at a far lower rate than the AVA. On the whole, however, vending was once again illegal throughout the city of Los Angeles, and vendors were left without a coalition that was dedicated to fighting for their rights.

## **1.4 The Battle to Legalize Street Vending in California**

This changed in the mid 2000s with a resurgence of vendor activism. In 2008, Caridad, a street vendor in Boyle Heights, began working with the East Los Angeles Community Cooperation (ELACC), a local organization in Boyle Heights, on organizing vendors. Vendors at the time were facing increased harassment and violence at the hands of the LAPD, and ELACC began holding local organizing meetings with vendors. These vendor meetings eventually grew beyond just Boyle Heights, and began proliferating throughout the city into other areas where vending was common. These meetings ultimately led to the creation of a steering committee dedicated to decriminalizing vending, which was composed of street vendors, and members of

ELACC, Public Counsel (an LA based non-profit legal aid organization), and the Leadership for Urban Renewal Network (LURN), which later became Inclusive Action for the City. In 2012, the LA Street Vendor Campaign was officially started, with membership consisting of Inclusive Action, Community Power Collective (CPC), Public Counsel and ELACC, with support from over 60 other local organizations (LA Street Vendor Campaign, n.d.; The LA Street Vendor Campaign, n.d.) In 2013, the campaign saw its first success by gaining the support of local LA councilmembers, Jose Huizar and Curren Price, who officially introduced a motion to the LA City Council to legalize and regulate street vending. Although this motion did not pass, it began a conversation within the local government around street vending and the conditions faced by street vendors.

After failing to legalize vending through the LA City Council, organizers began to consider alternative avenues to legalization. Consequently, the coalition turned its focus from the local to the state level. Because of the legal theory of preemption, which mandates that a higher authority of law preempts lower authorities, organizers realized that if the state legalized vending, the city would be legally obligated to do the same. They began organizing with other activists and organizers in the state, forming the California Street Vendor's Coalition, and soon joined with state senator Ricardo Lara, who represented southeast LA, and had long been a champion of street vendors and economic justice, in writing a state bill legalizing vending, which passed in 2018. This bill, SB 946, decriminalized vending throughout the state of California, and mandated that localities can only restrict vending in certain areas if it impacts health, safety, and welfare. It also allowed for the creation of a permitting process.

This was not the only success of the LA vending coalition. During the years it took to write, propose, and finally pass SB 946, street vending was also decriminalized in the city of LA.

One important factor in the decriminalization was the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and his administration's executive actions on immigration and border control. Because at the time, street vending was a criminal offense in the city, there were fears by both vending advocates and city officials that the executive action would lead to an increased number of vendors being targeted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Therefore, in order to protect vendors from persecution from ICE, the city decriminalized vending in 2017, and mandated that any street vending violations were subject only to administrative fines, rather than criminal charges (Hidalgo, 2022; LA Street Vendor Campaign, n.d.).

However, even with this decriminalization, local organizers in LA continued to work on and advocate for the state bill. One reason is because although it was decriminalized, it was not actually legalized, meaning that while vendors could not be charged criminally for vending, it was still technically illegal. Organizers also knew that the state law would provide vendors with more protection and stability as compared with a city ordinance—it is far harder to repeal a state law than it is to change a city ordinance. Additionally, because of the expansive and complex administrative geography of southern California, many vendors in the greater LA area were not covered by the new policy of decriminalization, including vendors in neighboring cities, municipalities, and unincorporated areas, as well as in LA county.

Although SB 946 represented a monumental victory for vendors, there were issues with the new law. Under SB 946, cities were still able to criminally enforce county health codes, allowing them to cite vendors for not having the required health permits. Because street vending was illegal for over 100 years, the majority of health codes and food safety laws were not designed for mobile food vendors. As a result of these antiquated health codes, many mobile food vendors were unable to legally obtain these permits, which in practice meant that many

food vendors continued to face criminalization by the city and local police, including criminal charges, confiscation of their carts and other vending supplies, and high fines which were often prohibitively expensive. This criminal enforcement was used to great effect by cities to continue the crackdowns on vendors, who they viewed as undesirable.

Therefore, while SB 946 was a crucial step in the fight for street vendor justice in California, because of these issues, it soon became clear that it was not enough, especially for mobile food vendors. A 2021 report from the UCLA School of Law Community Economic Development Clinic and Public Counsel titled *Unfinished Business* describes the barriers to access faced by many vendors, including unreasonable fees of up to \$14,000 in startup fees and \$48,000 in minimum annual fees (Bennett et al., 2021). In order to address the problems, the coalition worked with state senator Lena Gonzalez to draft and ultimately pass SB 972 in 2022, which modernized the California Retail Food Code to include regulations tailored specifically to compact mobile food operations (CMFOs), including street vendors. In addition to these changes, the bill aimed to decriminalize street vending for all vendors and ensure that vendors operating without permits would be subject only to administrative fines, rather than criminal penalties. Moreover, the enforcement of the new law now lies solely with local health departments, rather than local police, further protecting vendors from unlawful criminalization (BBK, 2022).

Following these legislative successes, LA members of the coalition continue to advocate for vendors at the local level, ensuring that LA and surrounding areas are compliant with these new laws. This includes pursuing legal avenues when it is determined that a local government was not acting within state law. For example, in 2022, two street vendors named Merlin Alvarado and Ruth Monroy joined with coalition members ELACC, CPC, and Inclusive Action

for the City to sue the city of LA for violating SB 946 through their creation of no-vending zones in specific parts of the city. The plaintiffs claimed that these no-vending zones, which were mainly located in lucrative tourist sites including Hollywood Boulevard, the Hollywood Bowl, Dodger Stadium, Crypto Arena, and Universal Studios/City Walk, were illegal because under state law, cities are only allowed to restrict vending in cases of health and safety. After a protracted legal battle, in 2024 the vendors and their allies were successful in their suit, and the no-vending zones were eliminated, with the city agreeing to cancel and refund any citations for vending in these areas (Mackey, 2024).

Additionally, this battle was fought on multiple fronts, with vendor organizations also successfully lobbying the city council to eliminate the exclusionary zones. While this legislative success was achieved prior to ruling of the court, the coalition members continued to pursue the lawsuit because of the often tenuous nature of city laws—although this city council ultimately came down on the side of vendors, subsequent city councils might not be as amenable, meaning that having the illegality of the exclusionary zones codified in law was crucial to the long term success of vending in the city. This example shows the constant monitoring and supervision necessary to ensure that cities and municipalities in the state are not illegally persecuting vendors, and that the protection and defense of vulnerable urban populations like vendors is an ongoing battle.

## **1.5 Structure of the Dissertation**

Street vendors in LA exist within a paradigm of neoliberal urbanism and global racial capitalism, often operating under processes of differentiation, exclusion, criminalization, and dispossession. This dissertation will explore how they navigate these complex and interrelated

urban conditions, with a focus on their use of digital devices and technologies. It will also investigate how they resist these oppressive practices through digital activism and organizing, theorizing the street vendor movement as a localized expression of a larger urban politics from below. To do so, this dissertation consists of seven chapters, including a literature review, methods chapter, and three analysis chapters.

In chapter two, I build a theoretical framework that will structure this study. I position my research broadly within literatures on global racial capitalism, urban geography, and digital geographies, building on concepts from each to situate my argument. To begin, I review literature on racial capitalism, immigration and bordering, and labor, and then begin to investigate how these intersect with informal labor, and the informal economy more broadly. I then move to thinking about informal labor as it relates to urban politics, including a discussion of neoliberal urbanism and the spatialities and socialities of this political project. This includes crucially an understanding of the importance of public space not only for urban politics, but also for street vending. Finally, I turn to a discussion of the digital, exploring how it has been studied within geography, including the production of spatial media and its use in digital placemaking; its relationship with differentiation and contemporary practices of inclusion and exclusion; and how it has both engendered new forms of political activism, and affected existing ones, including the use of social media platforms for political organizing.

In chapter three, I outline the methods I used to conduct this research. I begin with a discussion of Burrowoy's extended case method, and the importance of both spatiality and temporality to my project. I aim to connect localized conditions and practices across both time and space, showing how an analysis of street vending in LA not only relates to other places across the globe, but also how it can be connected with social movements in other places,

contributing to a larger global political movement for liberation from the destructive forces of racial capitalism. I then detail the specific methods of data collection I used, including predominantly digital ethnography, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews, and the analysis I performed on this data. Finally, I discuss my positionality as a researcher doing this work, as well as limitations and issues I faced during and after the field work.

In chapter four, I begin to investigate the intersections between street vending and digital technologies, focusing on three main areas where the digital and vending meet: within vending practices, within vending organizing, and within online vending activism. I begin with a broad look at how vendors use digital technologies within their everyday labor, including digital payment systems; administration activities, including applying for and acquiring permits; and marketing and advertising their businesses. Within these practices, I examine how the relationship between vendors and the digital is often marked by various forms of differentiation and conditional processes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as how vendors resist these practices. I also begin to think about how vendors use the digital to advocate for their place in the neoliberal city through digital placemaking. I then turn to an investigation of how digital technologies are used by vendor organizers, including the use of communication technologies for building and maintaining coalitions, as well as the potential hazards these technologies can produce. Finally, I look at online vendor activism, exploring both how digital technologies are used by vendor activists, as well as the digital spaces and social relations that are produced through their use. This includes analyzing the use of handheld digital recording devices to document violence and harassment against vendors, as well the use of these often-viral video recordings to not only attempt to hold perpetrators accountable, but also to raise public awareness about the issues vendors face, and build online coalitions centered on vendor politics.

I also discuss the difficulties and potential dangers of doing activism on commodified digital platforms, including the potential for digital manipulation and suppression of more radical politics that threaten hegemonic racial capitalism, as well as the resulting importance of conducting both on and offline activism. In this chapter, I also focus in particular on the case of a group of local activists called the Justice 8, and how digital technologies were not only critical to their activism, but also came to influence their eventual persecution by the state.

Chapter Five examines the urban governance of street vending in LA, including the urban ideologies, frameworks, and governance strategies that condition vending in the city. I begin by discussing how vendors are discursively framed within urban imaginaries as undesirable and foreign, including how these characterizations are operationalized to promote and produce specific neoliberal urban futures. Building on this portrayal of vendors as “alien” to cities, I then discuss the connections between street vending and immigration, including the strong relationship between culture and vending, and the importance of Latino culture and identity within both street vending communities and politics. From there, I look more closely at the urban spatial practices and politics of vending, including the importance of public space, and the ways in which vendors’ articulations of their right to access and use public space in the city represents a form of urban politics that can challenge hegemonic neoliberal urbanism. I then examine how urban governance policies and practices in LA produce difference within vending communities, showing how the formalization process has led to the marginalization and exclusion of some vendors. Finally, I return to the discussion of violence against vendors from chapter four, examining how the processes of othering, differentiation, and exclusion described throughout this chapter contribute to a lack of safety for many vendors. This includes an examination of the relationship between vendors and law enforcement, including code enforcement agents, police,

and federal immigration agents, and how these forces combine to not only discipline marginalized urban communities, but also to facilitate the production of exclusionary neoliberal cities through carceral politics of racial capitalism.

Chapter six brings the previous two chapters together to begin to theorize how localized movements against exclusionary urban governance like the street vendor movement are imagining new urban futures as facilitated by the use of digital technologies. I begin by discussing tensions and conflicts both within and surrounding the vendor movement in LA, including the different political ideologies that are contained within the movement. I then explore the potential new forms of social and spatial relations that can be generated through the vendor movement, asking “what kind of worlds are possible through the enactment of vendor politics?” Finally, I begin to conceptualize a broader global urban politics that can be built by connecting the vendor movement with grounded social justice politics in other places, including how organizers and activists not only understand their work as connected with other places and politics, but also how they are actively creating global political networks of interlocking and overlapping localized movements.

In the conclusion, I bring together my analysis across the chapters. I show how vendors are subject to differentiation and conditional forms of inclusion and exclusion through neoliberal urban governance practices and policies, including through their experiences with digital technologies. However, I also explore the ways in which vendors resist and refuse this neoliberal urbanism through the use of on and offline politics, imagining new urban futures which are not dominated by neoliberal racial capitalism, and generating and maintaining coalitions that not only transcend space, but also connect movements around specific localized issues and conditions under a larger framework of global urban politics from below. I also consider the

significance of this work for understanding not only street vending, but urban politics more generally, including how future academic work on street vending in LA can continue to contribute to the generation of a global liberatory politics upon which new emancipatory urban futures can be built across the world.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

In my work, I theorize street vending through an understanding of global racial capitalism, connecting differentiated conditions of labor, urban public space, and digital technologies and conceptualizing racial capitalism as a global process with localized forms and conditions. To do so, in this chapter, I situate my research and analysis within literatures on racial capitalism, urban geographies, and digital geographies, drawing on specific concepts and theories within each.

To begin, I conceptualize racial capitalism as the overall theoretical framework under which I understand not just street vending, but sociospatial relations more generally. Following a general discussion about how differentiation is constitutive of capitalism, I then draw out concepts within this framework, including labor, immigration, and the relationship between the informal and formal economies. I subsequently move to thinking about concepts within urban geography, including urban governance and public space. Finally, I turn to look at concepts within digital geographies that are integral to a study of the intersection of street vending and the digital, including digital placemaking and digital activism.

### **2.1 Racial Capitalism**

Central to my understanding of street vending, and of global political economy more generally, is the concept of racial capitalism. Racial capitalism theorizes racial differentiation and capitalism as historically co-constitutive, with modern capitalism being built upon, and still contemporarily reliant on, differentiation as enacted under slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and genocide. Contemporary theories of racial capitalism are most commonly traced to the work of

Cedric Robinson (2021), whose seminal work *Black Marxism* builds on Marx (2024/1867) to show how racial hierarchies were fundamental to the development of capitalism and a global capitalist system through the Atlantic slave trade, colonial labor, and other forms of racialized violence and oppression. Robinson argues that capitalism was not a refutation of the feudal system, but rather grew out of it, building on and expanding already existing racial hierarchies. This reification of hierarchies based on race is constitutive of capitalism, especially with regards to labor—the division and opposition of the working class based on race was critical to the development of capitalism. This division remains to this day and can be seen clearly in the contemporary discussion around immigration and labor.

It is also important to note that under a theory of racial capitalism, social differentiation as constitutive of capitalism is not limited to racialization. As Robinson writes, the central tendency of capitalism is “not to homogenize, but to differentiate” (2021, p. 26). Therefore, other forms of social division were, and are, also fundamental to the creation and maintenance of global capitalism, including differentiation based on class, gender, and nationality. An understanding of how class divisions are created and utilized in the workings of capital is central to Marxist theory—under capitalism, the working class is exploited by the owners of the means of production, allowing for the creation of profit and the continued expansion of capital markets (Marx, 2024/1867). Similar to Robinson, feminist Marxist theorists (Bhattachya, 2018; Federici, 2004; Fraser, 2016) have also shown how gender divisions, and the exploitation of unpaid labor performed predominantly by women, are central to the development of capitalism— without the free social reproductive labor of women, the working class would not be able to sustain and reproduce itself, leading to a collapse of productive labor and capitalism as a whole. The current conditions of global labor and capitalism are also an example of this required

differentiation—the hierarchization of nation-states has allowed for not only the accumulation by dispossession of resources and commodities which fueled the growth of Western capitalism, but also the spatial reorganization of labor, providing cheap workers and weakening global labor power (Bhattachyra, 2018; Robinson, 2021; Walia, 2021; Wallerstein, 2011). As discussed later in the chapter, this spatial reorganization of labor is directly linked with the production and maintenance of global racial capitalism through migration, bordering, and the subsequent movement of both precarious labor and capital.

Therefore, this division is central to the workings of capitalism itself. As Melamed (2015) writes,

Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. (p.77)

Capitalism requires inequality to operate and thus produces it through the construction of difference. As Gilmore writes, racism under capitalism is “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death in distinct yet densely connected political geographies” (Gilmore, 2002, p.261). This describes a dialectical relationship in which people are divided, or made distinct, in order to be re-connected in formations that serve hegemonic capitalism. Thus, to operate, capitalism utilizes what Gilmore calls “antirelationality” to “control who can relate and under what terms,” creating the conditions for exploitation, violence, and death for populations disposable under capitalism. (as cited in Melamed, 2015, p.78).

This concept is also closely linked with theories of surplus labor, which as Marx (1867/2024) described, acts as a disciplining mechanism for capital. Scholars of racial capitalism have identified how the foundations of modern capitalism are built on labor differentiation, including racialized labor division between free and unfree workers (Bhattacharyya, 2018; McIntyre, 2011; Robinson, 2021). Moreover, these scholars have emphasized how these divisions, although historic, are not natural. The division of white and non-white (as well as Western and non-Western) labor, is constantly being recreated and reified, often through violent methods, promoting whiteness as providing workers with “the tangible material benefit of staying out of the surplus laboring population” (McIntyre, 2011, p. 1506).

It is important to note that this differentiation is not immutable over time and space but is instead flexible and attuned to the specific material conditions under which it is occurring. It is also responsive to changing conditions, allowing for an ever-changing hierarchical organization of difference. One method of maintaining this differentiation over time and space is through various methods and forms of inclusion. One example of this is what Yen Le Espiritu has termed “differential inclusion,” or a process through which marginalized groups are “deemed integral to the nation’s economy, culture, identity, and power—but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing” (Espiritu, 2003, p.57). For example, Cacho has identified how some vulnerable groups are targeted by the state for discipline and punishment but are excluded from any protection from the state (Cacho, 2012). Not only does the often-violent criminalization of these groups help control the conditions under which they live, but it also serves to elevate the positions of other groups both materially and socially—for example, to be a citizen of a state implies that there are non-citizens, who are often subsequently devalued in order to ensure the status of citizenship. As Cacho (2012) writes, the “source of one racial

group's social value...was contingent upon and made legible through the devaluation of an/other” (p.15).

This differential inclusion also describes the process of elevating certain marginalized groups or individuals to support the continued subjugation of others. For example, processes of bordering create dichotomies between citizen/non-citizen, but also between “illegal” and “legal”, excluding some migrants in favor of other, state-sanctioned ones. These divisions are often mitigated by race, class, nationality, gender, and other social characteristics, and are fluid and ever-changing depending on the needs of the state and capital (Walia, 2013). It is also important to note that this differentiation is not merely a result of immigration politics but is purposefully produced by the state, through various structures and methods, including bordering.

### **2.1.1 Immigration and Bordering**

Under racial capitalism, immigration and bordering serve as mechanisms through which this hierarchical ordering is constructed and operationalized. This relationship between racial capitalism and migrant labor is foundational to not only contemporary racial capitalism, but to its conception—as Robinson (2021) reminds us, the origins of global racial capitalism are directly intertwined with the forced migration of millions of enslaved Africans. From its inception, racial capitalism was built on the production of difference at multiple scales, often mediated through borders and other forms of hierarchical filtering. In order to maintain this system, as well as manage the externalities associated with mass migration, migrants are divided from non-migrants, as well as from each other, based on various social relations including race, class, and country of origin.

Walia (2013) has theorized this as “border imperialism,” or a process “by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained” (p. 5-6). As numerous scholars (Walia, 2013, 2021; Mezzandra & Neilson, 2013) have shown, bordering is an explicit project to divide the working class, control labor, and allow for the free flow of capital. Moreover, the presence and conditions of migrant workers in the United States is directly linked to historic and contemporary US foreign policy, especially with regards to migrants from Latin America, including resource extraction; US political and economic interference, both violent and non-violent; the relocation of production into the global South and ensuing changes in labor within those states; and the border as a mechanism for controlling flows of labor and capital (Walia, 2021). Migration is thus a defining feature of global capitalism—policies and practices of the global North designed to expropriate and accumulate wealth in the South generate and intensify social conditions that push people to immigrate, while simultaneously increasing the wealth of global North nations, with this prosperity then pulling people to those nations. Consequently, as Haneih (2019) writes, “the uneven and combined development that typifies contemporary capitalism means that the ‘pull’ is causally linked to the ‘push’ (and vice-versa) in a mutually reinforcing process” (p. 54).

Bordering and immigration policies are therefore used to construct and solidify various forms of hierarchical difference. In order to produce this differentiation, Walia (2021) identifies four border governance strategies: exclusion, or methods of containing and expelling people through walls, detention centers, and deportations; territorial diffusion, or the expansion of the border and border enforcement to both within and beyond the state’s borders; commodified inclusion, or the incorporation of undocumented or temporary migrants who lack labor power or protections to facilitate capital accumulation; and discursive control, or the division of migrants

into discrete categories through discursive framings and characterizations. All of these strategies work together to divide and order migrants to allow for the movement of capital at various scales and temporalities. Drawing on Harevy's conception of spatial fix, which describes capitalism's ability to resolve internal contradictions through the organization of space, this has been theorized as a "migration fix," or the deployment of "an array of bordering, channeling and containment practices to regulate surplus populations and create opportunities for profit-extraction" (Bird & Schmid, 2023). Thus, the segmentation of the global labor force, produced through relations between the North and South, is facilitated and controlled by contemporary bordering practices, and acts as a spatial fix for capital. As Walia (2021) states, "the free flow of capital requires precarious labor, which is shaped by borders" (p.6). Therefore, bordering and migration policies allow for the mobility of capital through the immobility of people.

This includes not only the segmentation and control of global labor, but also the corresponding foreign and domestic forms of dispossession, exploitation, and expropriation enacted by the US empire and its allies. Historic and contemporary immigration policies and practices are created through attempts to not only facilitate and maintain capital accumulation, but also to control the ensuing conditions. For example, economic and military interventions by the US, including the forced adoption of neoliberal economic policies and the correlating US led and supported dirty wars, resulted in the displacement and subsequent migration of millions of people to the US, leading domestically to stricter immigration policies, as well as the reduction of social services and programs in favor of neoliberal carceral governance. Therefore, as Walia (2021) writes, immigration and border policies represent "a thread braiding together social warfare, mass destabilization, and displacement, capitalist extraction, and militarized carceral

control, at home and abroad” (p.40). This dialectical relationship between foreign and domestic policy as realized through the border is important because it allows for an understanding of domestic differentiation as a process that is a direct result of foreign policy, making it inherently global in nature. As Clyde Woods (2007) argues, “Internal racial regimes can no longer be treated as incidental to global processes” (p. 48).

### **2.1.2 Labor**

As discussed above, the production and maintenance of surplus labor populations are critical to racial capitalism. As Marx (2024/1867) writes, “the pressure of the unemployed compels those that are employed to furnish more labour, and therefore makes the supply of labour to a certain extent independent of the supply of workers” (p.25). As a result, capitalists are thus allowed to operate outside of the forces of supply and demand, contrary to their framing as natural and unyielding. Marx (2024/1867) also identified three types of surplus-- “floating” populations who move between employment and unemployment relative to the changing needs of capital; “latent” populations of dispossessed and displaced rural populations who are preparing to enter the urban industrial proletariat; and “stagnant” populations who remain unemployed indefinitely. Although historically, the majority of surplus populations can be characterized as the first two, the latter stagnant populations have grown in both the North and South as a result of uneven development and changes in global labor (Davis, 2004; Sassen, 2014). Moreover, scholars have also shown how these stagnant surplus populations tend to be made up of non-white populations, with these workers often being framed as not only unproductive, but also predatory, criminal, and dangerous (McIntyre & Nast, 2011).

Bhattacharyya (2018) has identified this process as one of “expulsion,” which, along with exploitation and expropriation, is fundamental to the workings of racial capitalism. These expelled populations, who are often racialized, are banished to the “edges of capitalist living” (p.26 & 27). This is particularly evident in studies of colonial and post-colonial development. Within post-colonial Marxian theory, primitive accumulation plays a crucial role in understanding the processes of exploitation, expropriation, and expulsion, and thus the production of surplus labor. Marx (2024/1867) describes how the birth and growth of capitalism was enacted through the violent dispossession of the means of production of non-capitalist producers, a process he called “primitive accumulation.” Primitive accumulation opened up previously collectivized land for private production, producing a class of laborers who were forced into the capitalist labor market to survive, a process known as “proletarianization.” As theorized by Marx, primitive accumulation is temporally fixed at the inception of capitalism, and the creation of capitalist markets. However, theorists of racial capitalism have joined other critics (Coulthard, 2014; Federici, 2004; Harvey, 2003; Kropotkin, 1995; Luxemburg, 1951) in arguing against Marx’s temporality of primitive accumulation, highlighting the persistent role of violent dispossession in the reproduction of capitalism.

This is especially true of colonial and post-colonial places in the global South—the continued process of what Harvey (2003) has termed “accumulation by dispossession” not only expropriates from producers in global South to enrich consumers in the North, and exploits labor in the global South, but also expels certain populations from the formal capitalist sector. One example of the continued nature of accumulation by dispossession, and its enduring effects on places and people in the global South, is the persistent efforts by Western states, NGOs and global governance structures to promote and facilitate “development” in the South. Sanyal

(2007) has described how development in the global South, rather than uplifting poor, working-class people in the South, has instead led to the creation of populations which have been “proletarianised” but are unable to enter the workforce, thus rendering them stagnant surplus populations. In order to counteract this, during development, capitalism works to construct an “outside” in which these expelled populations can occupy. Sanyal has named this outside, the “wasteland,” a non-capitalist space constructed through the development of capitalism, and necessary for accumulation in post-colonial development. Sanyal has identified this wasteland as the “needs economy,” but it is more commonly known as the informal economy or sector.

### **2.1.3 Theories of Informality**

This framing of the informal economy, and informality more generally, as a parallel space to the formal, capitalist economy, is a critical intervention into classic theories on informality and development. Prior to the 1960s, studies on the informal economy were scarce because it was widely accepted that what were then known as “traditional” economies would quickly be replaced by modern, capitalist ones through the right combination of economic policies and practices. This reflected the work of prominent economist W. Arthur Lewis and his famous “Lewis Turning Point,” a theory that economic development would produce enough formal jobs and eventually absorb surplus rural labor, leading to a “turning point” wherein all wages would rise above subsistence levels (Lewis, 1954). Thus, the informal economy was a fleeting space which was quickly eradicated under capitalist economic development. However, rising unemployment in the 1960s and 70s in developing countries seemed to disprove this theory and led scholars to begin to turn their critical attention to informality.

Before looking at theories of the development and continuation of the informal economy, it is important to define what it is. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the informal economy consists of “all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements” (ILO, n.d.). This is an expansive definition that “extends the focus from enterprises that are not legally regulated to include employment relationships that are not legally regulated or socially protected” (Chen, 2012). Crucially, this is a relatively recent definition that includes informal work that is performed within the formal sector—it expands the informal from a focus on informal enterprises to informal labor, and includes wage workers who “are employed without employer contributions to worker safety” (Chen, 2012, p.8). Additionally, it includes workers who are self-employed. Street vendors can fall into multiple of these categories—some are self-employed, while others have a more ambiguous employment relationship where they might rely on a single supplier, or sell goods on commission—this is the case with some *paleta* vendors, for example.

Theories of the development and constitution of the informal economy have been the subject of debate for many years. The term “informal sector” was first coined by British anthropologist Keith Hart in his study of low-income migrants in Accra, Ghana (Hart, 1973), and subsequent studies began to show that the informal sector was not merely marginal to the formal economy but generated productive and profitable economic activity, leading to a number of theorizations and schools of thought regarding its production, makeup, and relation to the formal economy. According to Chen (2012), this debate eventually crystalized into four dominant frameworks—*Dualists* (Hart, 1973; ILO, 1972, Sethuraman, 1976), who view the informal economy as marginal and separate from the formal economy; *Structuralists* (Castells and Portes,

1989; Moser, 1978) who, inspired by Marxist theory, view the informal economy as a subordinate of the formal that allows firms to be more competitive by reducing the costs of inputs and labor; *Legalists* (de Soto, 1989, 2000), who point to restrictive legal systems as driving voluntary participation in the informal economy by potential entrepreneurs and independent operators; and *Voluntarists* (Maloney, 2004), who, like the legalists, also view informal participation as voluntary, but rather than being driven by barriers to entry, see it as a strategic decision made by participants after weighing the cost and benefits of operating formally. Additionally, Marxist scholars have also focused more specifically on the informal economy and its relationship to the development of capitalism. For classical Marxists (Moore, 2004) the transition to wage labor in the formal economy is understood as integral to primitive accumulation, and thus the development of capitalism. They therefore view the informal economy as “pathological and as evidence of a stalled transition to “real” capitalism” (Samson, 2015, p. 815). In this way, although they are typically politically very far from the dualists, their understanding of the relationship between the formal and informal economies is similar.

Sanyal’s conception of the informal economy, which he calls the “need economy,” critiques all of the above frameworks. Unlike the dualists, he theorizes the informal and formal sectors as co-constitutive, rather than separate, and in contrast to the legalists and voluntarists, he does not view participation in the informal economy as providing a voluntary or an entrepreneurial path. Although closest to the structuralists, his framework places the informal economy parallel to, rather than subordinate of, the formal economy. Rather than focusing on firms, Sanyal takes a more post-colonial approach, analyzing the relationship between primitive accumulation, development, and informality. As he writes,

The informal sector is the product of capitalist development, of its primitive accumulation, the modern sector in the course of its own arising creates the space of the dispossessed, the space in which the informal activities take place. In this representation underdevelopment is the product of development rather than its initial condition. (Sanyal, 2007, p. 206)

Thus, the informal economy, or wasteland, serves as a constitutive outside of formal capitalism, existing to address the contradictions of capitalism which, through dispossession and displacement under primitive accumulation, create surplus populations which cannot be absorbed by the formal sector. This can be seen as a direct critique of the Marxist theory that informality is unnatural or the result of a stalled transition to capitalism. Far from being an aberration, informality is not only a natural result of the transition to capitalism, but is actually fundamental to it, especially in the global South.

There have been critiques of Sanyal's conception of the informal economy as separate from the formal economy. Gidwani and Wainwright (2014) argue that the spheres of the informal, or need economy, and the formal, or accumulation economy, are not discrete. Sanyal's separation of these spheres is partially based on an understanding of accumulation and profit. Sanyal claims that, while surplus accumulation is possible within the informal economy, this extra-capitalist space is "governed by a logic that is fundamentally different from the one that animates the world of capitalist production" (Sanyal and Bhattacharya, 2009, p. 36). Unlike the formal economy, which uses exploitation and extraction to accumulate capital, the informal economy "accommodates the surplus labor force by maximizing income rather than profit and then distributing the average product to the family members irrespective of their contribution to income" (Sanyal and Bhattacharya, 2009, p. 38). In other words, the needs economy does not exploit or extract but rather is organized through an "alternative logic of production" (Gidwani

and Wainwright, 2014, p. 45). However, Gidwani and Wainwright point out that these claims are dubious and fail to account for the fact that money circulates and recirculates between both the need and accumulation economies. Moreover, they argue that Sanyal (2007) fails to account for the movement of people between the formal and informal economies. Rather than being permanently alienated from capital's "reserve army," vulnerable populations are conditionally able to sell their labor in the formal economy. They therefore are often constantly being contingently included and excluded, meaning that the overall framework of the relationship between formal and informal work "is not absolute expulsion of vulnerable populations from capital's 'reserve army,' but rather, the spatio-temporal flux in, and hence, tenuousness of capital's embrace," (Gidwani and Wainwright, 2014, p. 45). However, while these critiques are important for an understanding of informality within a larger paradigm of global racial capitalism, Sanyal's work still represents an important conceptual intervention in informality studies because not only does it understand the importance of the informal economy in relation to global capitalism, but also because it helps explain that the continued growth of informality is not an aberration or the result of individualized decision making, but rather a necessary condition of capitalist development.

#### **2.1.4 The Current State of the Informal Economy**

Conceptualizing the informal economy and placing it within larger frameworks of global racial capitalism is theoretically important not only to better understand the relationship between development and capitalism, but also because the informal economy is not only quickly growing, but also is appearing in new places and forms, especially in the global North (Chen & Carré, 2020). Nearly 2 billion people worldwide are informally employed, 58% of total global employment (WEIGO, n.d.). While the majority of those informal workers are located in the

global South, in the North, the growth of precarious and casual forms of labor, as well as the hollowing out of traditional formalized labor strongholds, has led to an increasing number of people working informally. One prominent example of this is the rise of contingent labor, including platform gig labor through companies like Uber and Postmates, independent contractors, and on-call workers. According to a 2018 Gallup poll, contingent labor, or gig work, is the primary job for 29% of Americans, including a quarter (25%) of full-time workers and nearly half (49%) of part-time workers (Gallup, 2018).

Moreover, gig workers are disproportionately non-white—for example, 30% of Latino adults, 20% of Black adults, and 19% of Asian adults have performed platform gig labor, compared with 12% of white adults (Anderson et al., 2021). This racial differentiation is important not only because it shows that accessing formal employment may be more difficult for non-White workers, but also because contingent and gig workers often lack legal protections, generally do not receive benefits from their employers, face increased job insecurity, and often face physical and sexual violence while working. In fact, 41% of non-White gig workers have reported feeling unsafe while working, as opposed to 28% of white workers, and non-White workers are more likely to face unwanted sexual advances while working than White workers (24% vs. 13%) (Anderson et al., 2021).

It is important to include this labor in our understanding of the informal economy, even though it may differ from traditional conceptions of informal work. As Tressie McMillian Cottom (2020a) writes, gig labor is “a type of job-adjacent work that looks like it is embedded in the formal economy but is governed by different state protections, which makes the work risky and those doing it vulnerable” (para. 2). Therefore, it is important to also consider the relationship between informality and changes in formal employment in the North, especially

with regards to deliberate efforts by capitalists to weaken labor power and increase profits. Throughout history, owners and bosses have created new strategies to do so, including violent strike-breaking and the spatial relocation of production to more “business friendly” locations where unions hold limited or no power. More recently, the weakening of existing labor laws and the NLRB itself has allowed companies to increasingly reclassify their workers as “independent contractors,” who are generally not subject to the same labor protections and benefits as formal workers (Cummings, 2018). Moreover, the weakening of labor protections and casualization of traditionally formal forms of labor also often pushes more and more workers into the informal economy, including both full-time and part-time work (Breman & van der Linden, 2014). As a result, these weakened labor regimes and new and emerging forms of informal labor like gig labor join traditionally informal labor like street vending in producing a growing informal economy in the North. Overall, labor globally is becoming more flexible, more precarious, and more informal, and is adapting to the ever-changing needs of capital.

As mentioned above, gig labor, and informal labor as a whole, is disproportionately performed by non-White workers. This is particularly true of migrant workers, especially undocumented ones, who are often unable to access formal employment (Flippen, 2012; Malheiros, 1998). For undocumented workers, the nature of their immigration status means that they are always necessarily at least partially informal workers—as Flippen (2012) writes, “even if their incomes are reported their labor is unauthorized” (p.23). As discussed previously, the differentiation caused by these policies and practices between workers in the North and South, and workers within those places is a defining feature of racial capitalism (Walia, 2021). The precarity faced by migrant informal workers, as well as by migrant and non-migrant workers as a whole, is necessary for the continued reproduction of capitalism. These workers represent the

surplus populations which exist in informal parallel spaces, making them incomprehensible and unrelatable to many formal workers, ensuring the production of difference that is necessary for accumulation (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Moreover, the differentiation of workers, including migrant workers, as facilitated through bordering and other divisive practices, is designed to not only explicitly divide working class populations, but also to subsume surplus populations to consolidate and maintain capitalism. However, migrant informal laborers also reveal the underlying inequities and exclusions of global capitalism. This is especially true of street vendors, whose labor is particularly visible because they operate in public, meaning that while “street vending, day laboring, and other informal economic activities are driven by large national and supranational forces...they are also sites where transnational migrations become visible” (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009, p. 127). Therefore, not only do informal workers represent a lens into the conditions of differentiated, uneven labor, but street vendors in particular serve as a useful case study, allowing for a deeper understanding of how global racial capitalism mediates and shapes everyday life.

## **2.2 Urban Politics of Informal Labor**

Although informal work does take place in rural areas, it is predominantly an urban activity (Bromley, 2000). As discussed in the prior section, Sanyal (2007) and others (Bhattacharyya, 2018) have shown how the production of the informal economy is directly related to the primitive accumulation of rural land and resources, and the ensuing urbanization and proletarianization of formerly rural peoples. This is also the case for informal workers in the global North—similar to how colonial peoples were denied access to formal urban jobs, and forced to work within a parallel, informal space, informal laborers in the North are also often

structurally prevented from working formally, whether due to citizenship status, racism and classism, or a lack of formal jobs. Furthermore, the dispossession of rural livelihoods in the South, and the resulting economic, social, and spatial changes this engenders, can be seen as similar to the political, social, and economic forces that fuel migration for many people. Moreover, there has been increased academic focus within postcolonial and critical urban studies on the relationship between the global North and South, including the emergence of what has been called the “South in the North,” with scholars beginning to apply theory on, and originating from, the South to places in the North, including post-colonial urban theory (Schindler, 2014; Devlin, 2018; Roy, 2009).

Because of this close relationship between informal labor and cities, theorizing vending under a framework of urban geography is important for this project. How do the cities in which vendors operate shape their subjectivities, and how do they in turn shape the cities themselves? Within the context of the racial capitalism in the global North, including the United States, this means beginning with an understanding of what has been called the “neoliberal city.” Much work has been done by scholars (Brenner, 2004; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009) showing how the social, political, and economic conditions of contemporary Western cities are shaped by, and through, neoliberalism. Contemporary urban governance is increasingly focused on creating neoliberal cities designed to attract capital and maximize growth through marketization, increases in public-private partnerships, and interurban competitiveness and marketing (Harvey, 1989; McCann, 2013). In order to do so, these advocates often prioritize the desires of private firms and middle to upper class white collar workers over those of current urban dwellers, especially vulnerable populations like the urban

poor, unhoused people, and street vendors. This has led to a larger existential question with regards to urban life— “who (and what) is the city for?”

This question is particularly important because differentiation and exclusion are key to the creation and maintenance of the neoliberal city. In order to promote their city as an attractive place for firms and white-collar workers, as well as their accompanying capital, boosters, planners, and city officials pursue policies designed to remove or hide undesirable people who are seen as incompatible with those goals. This is often accomplished not only through exclusionary and exterminatory policies including Stay Out of Drug Areas (SODA) and Stay Out of Prostitution Areas (SOAP) ordinances, the razing of encampments, anti-loitering laws and the construction of anti-homeless infrastructures, but also through discursive assertions of who belongs in the city and who doesn't (Bancroft, 2012). For street vendors, this often manifests as claims that they are “foreign,” “unsanitary,” “invasive,” and “undesirable,” as well as correlating vending with “third-world” cities,” casting them as representing a form of uncontrollable and disorderly urbanism that is antithetical to the ideal neoliberal city (Martin, 2014; Swanson, 2007; van Eck & Rath, 2024; Yatmo, 2008). These framings are used to not only cast them as incompatible with “modern,” “first-world” cities in the West, but also to justify city ordinances and policies that exclude them from the city, including crucially, urban public space.

## **2.3 Public Space**

One arena in which this question of “who (and what) is a city for?” predominates is the presence, availability, and conditions of urban public space. This is particularly relevant for street vending, as it largely occurs in public space, meaning that conflicts over vending and vendor rights can be characterized as struggles over the meaning and uses of public space. Public space

is commonly defined as publicly owned, accessible to all, and a space of democratic life ( Carr et al.,1992; Parkinson, 2012). However, these seemingly essential characteristics are instead frequently temporary, tenuous, and unevenly distributed and enforced, with city regulations and codes of conduct controlling who can inhabit public space, when they can be there, and what they can do there. The organization of public space reflects larger social, political, and economic rationalities of cities, who often manage it in ways designed to exclude people characterized as undesirable (including the homeless, drug users, youth, non-white and poor people, and street vendors), and privatize it for use by elites, developers, or corporations (Miller, 2007).

As a result, there are differing opinions on how public space should be organized and managed, as well as more broadly what its purpose is. Proponents of neoliberal, entrepreneurial cities see economic potential in public spaces, viewing them as drivers of growth, and therefore advocate for top-down organization in order to maximize their value and attract capital to the city (Chen et al, 2018). For example, many cities have created food truck villages not only to fuel economic activity in the city, but also to promote specific socio-cultural and economic visions of the city which might attract “culturally sophisticated” white collar workers and firms to their city (Martin, 2014). This is an example of both informality of desire, as well as the embrace of specific forms of vending by the city. However, while they promote these “organized” forms of economic activity in public space, they often simultaneously criminalize or displace less formal ones from public spaces, including street vendors operating informally out of need. These uses are often defended by those who view public space as a social justice issue, and advocate for the right to public space for all people in the city, including oppressed people, regardless of their economic potential (Mitchell, 2003). They see public space not as a driver of growth, but rather as an “urban commons” arguing that cities should not limit or place restrictions on its access or

use (Foster, 2009; Garnett, 2012; Ostrom, 2010). Unlike the top-down, neoliberal approach, this organization and use of public space is created from below, by the people who use it every day.

However, in spite of efforts to organize public space “from below,” maintaining its status as a resource for all, public spaces are becoming increasingly inaccessible and exclusionary. Reflecting a larger capture of cities by private capital, many cities have begun creating public-private parks and Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) (Miller, 2007). Although ostensibly open to the public, these spaces are in practice often inaccessible either due to location (for example, a courtyard within an office building), or to practices and policies that restrain their use. These emerging forms of “public” space are once again part of a larger neoliberalization and privatization of urban space. Moreover, they represent another iteration of the enclosure and capture of public goods by capital—just as Marx (2024/1867) wrote about the enclosure of the commons and its relationship with the emergence of capitalism in Europe, so too does the increasing encroachment of the private into urban public spaces fuel capital accumulation and the growth of urban neoliberal capitalism.

This conflict surrounding the purpose and use of public space is reflective of a larger conflict within urban governance and politics between neoliberal urbanism versus radical, bottom-up urbanism. The attempts to attract capital to cities and maximize growth advocated for by neoliberal urbanists are generally at odds with the desires of the common city dwellers, including prominently oppressed or subaltern peoples, who articulate a form of urban politics that is conceived by, designed for, and enacted through urban populations themselves. In other words, a politics from below. In the literature, this kind of bottom-up politics is related with urban social justice theories (Harvey, 1996; Rawls, 1999; Young, 1990), as well as postcolonial urbanism (Ong, 2011; Pieterse, 2015; Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2011, 2016a, 2016b; Simone, 2010),

It can also be seen in the increasingly popular calls for “the right to the city,” which, as conceptualized by David Harvey (2012), and building on the work of Lefebvre (1996), is a right to the production and organization of urban spaces as produced through surplus. The right to the city argues that those who produce the surplus value that drives the city should be in charge of how that value is distributed. Rather than top-down approaches led and enacted by municipal planners, policymakers, developers, and NGOs, the right to the city is a call from the streets to reclaim control of the production and organization of the city, and thus create cities in which people can not only survive, but thrive.

## **2.4 Digital Geographies**

This research is not only interested in the ways in which vendors navigate urban policies and practices of racial capitalism, but also how digital technologies are implicated in these efforts. In contemporary urban life, everything from work to mobility to leisure and recreation is digitally mediated. Digitality is ubiquitous and the proliferation of digital devices and technologies have fundamentally altered the ways in which we live in cities. They have not only created new urban subjectivities and politics but also serve to deepen and expand existing uneven urban geographies. Therefore, in order to understand street vending and the urban governance of informal work by migrants and other vulnerable people, we must consider the role and significance of digital technologies.

The digital in its various forms has long been the subject of academic inquiry and theory, especially the relationship between society and technology, with studies showing how the two are intertwined in complex, and often uneven, processes of socio-technical co-production (Benjamin, 2019; Castells, 1996; de Laet & Mol, 2000; Edwards, 2004; Galloway, 2004a;

Haraway, 1991; Hecht, 2001; Kline & Pinch, 1996; Latour, 2007; Osborne, 1997; Winner, 1980). Geographers have also become increasingly interested in the digital, with what Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski (2018) have called the “digital turn,” representing “a demonstrably marked turn to the digital as both object and subject of geographical inquiry” (p.25). The adoption and embedding of networked digital technologies within everyday life is having an increasing effect on place, the production of space and spatiality, mobility, spatial knowledge, practices, and politics (Castells, 1996; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2013; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Wilson, 2012). It is also creating distinct digital geographies, making it particularly useful for geographers (Ash, 2015; Dodge & Kitchin, 2002; Leszczynski, 2015). There are various ways that the digital is approached in geographic thought, including as a site, mode, and object of, and for, geographic knowledge production through technologies like GIS (Elwood, 2006; O’Sullivan, 2006; Rose, 2016); as a mediating force in the production of space and socio-spatial relations (Castells, 1996; De Souza e Silva, 2006; Dodge & Kitchin, 2002; Gordon & De Souza e Silva, 2011; Graham & Marvin, 2001); and as a space into and of itself, with research into the spatialities of cyber or virtual space, social media, algorithms, and big data, among others (Amoore, 2016; Ash, 2009; Crampton et al., 2013; Dodge & Kitchin, 2002; Galloway, 2004b; Zook, 2005).

One area of study that is particularly relevant to this research is the production and consumption of “spatial media,” (Crampton, 2009) which refers to “both new technological objects (hardware, software, programming techniques, etc.) with a spatial orientation, as well as to nascent geographic information content forms produced via attendant practices with, through, and around these technologies” (Leszczynski, 2015, p.729). It can be classified as part of the larger geoweb, which describes “the merging of digital content and location, as well as the

practices and presences that sustain and are sustained by this convergence” (Leszczynski, 2015, p.729). The use of spatial media affects the production of space and spatiality, creating new spatial practices of location, geodata creation and collection, movement, and relationality—spaces are increasingly being mediated and experienced through the digital, which in turn transforms “the social production of space and the spatial production of society” (Sutko & De Souza e Silva 2010, p.812). Spatial media also contributes to the production of new spatialities through actions including “checking in,” navigation, and geolocating people and services (like street vendors), bridging the gap between the virtual and the physical. These new spaces have been referred to in a number of ways, including “code/spaces” (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011), “hybrid spaces” (De Souza e Silva, 2006), “augmented reality” (Graham et al., 2013), and “mediated spatiality” (Leszczynski, 2015).

The production of spatial media also contributes to what Halegoua and Polson (2021), have called “digital placemaking,” or the “use of digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others- to embrace digital media affordances in order to cultivate or maintain a sense of attachment to place” (p. 574). Through the use of digital placemaking, people can generate a sense of belonging within abstracted urban space, “turning the spaces in which we find ourselves into the spaces in which we dwell” (Halegoua & Polson, 2021, pp. 574). Moreover, digital placemaking can be a tool used by marginalized or oppressed peoples to counter hegemonic narratives (Labayen & Gutierrez, 2021) and can act as “political and performative expressions of identity and one’s place in the world” (Halegoua & Moon, 2021, pp. 65). Although digital placemaking is often used to refer to the creation of positive socio-spatial relations, including place-based community building (Humphreys & Liao, 2013; Ozkul, 2013; Polson, 2015, 2016), it can also be used to exacerbate pre-existing exclusions, inequalities, and

erasures for specific populations in specific places (Halegoua, 2020), as well as to control and discipline spaces and mobilities (Özkul, 2021). Therefore, the socio-spatial relations created and mediated through practices of digital placemaking often reflect larger social, political, and economic relations, including crucially racial capitalism, reproducing them within a digital space.

#### **2.4.1 The Digital and the Production of Difference**

This relationship between digital mediations, socio-spatial relations, and racial capitalism are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in work detailing the relationship between technology and differentiation. Scholars have shown how digital technologies are co-constituted with social relations, including race, gender, and class, reproducing and reconfiguring existing social and spatial inequalities (Benjamin, 2019; Datta, 2015; Greenfield, 2013; Jefferson, 2020; Nakamura, 2007; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012; Safransky, 2019). Moreover, the digital has always been implicated in the production and maintenance of difference (Breckenridge, 2014; Browne, 2015; Kwet, 2019; ). For example, IBM computing was a crucial partner in the surveillance apparatuses created and utilized by the South African apartheid state to ensure the continued violent socio-spatial repression of non-White South Africans (Kwet, 2019). Because of this, scholars including Daniels (2013) and McMillian Cottom (2020b) have argued for analyzing digital technologies and the sociospatial relations they co-produce under a framework of racial capitalism, with McMillian Cottom stating that “Internet technologies are central to the political economy of race and racism because Internet technologies are the politics and capital of capitalism as we presently experience it,” (pp.441-442). Therefore, because racial capitalism understands differentiation, including racism, as co-constitutive with capitalism, it is a useful lens through which to analyze the socio-spatial relations of digital technologies.

The digital also plays a key role in contemporary practices of inclusion and exclusion, which, as discussed, are necessary mechanisms through which difference is produced under racial capitalism. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of the border and the practice of bordering through what has been called the “digital border” (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019, 2022). The digital border can be understood as a “shifting assemblage of technologies and meanings organised around historically-specific power relations that regulate migrant mobility across the binary of inside/outside at the edge and within the boundaries of national sovereignty” (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). Numerous scholars have shown the crucial role digital technologies play in mediating the border, and in controlling who is allowed to enter and who is turned away, including facial recognition software, biometric passport data, and sophisticated systems of surveillance, including the use of drone and satellite imagery to locate and track migrants (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022; Dijstelbloem, 2021). This also includes the use of big data and algorithmic profiling to create digital profiles of “risky” migrants, as well as complex systems like *iBorderCtrl*, an AI project which combines already existing forms of digital control including biometric passports, facial recognition, and fingerprinting with automated lie-detection software (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). Moreover, the relationship between technology and bordering extends far beyond the physical border itself, with the digital playing a crucial role in mediating the experiences of migrants once they have crossed the border through the collection of data and the subsequent creation of individual data profiles which algorithmically determine the conditions of migrant life (Adey, 2004; Haggerty & Erickson, 2000; Pollozek & Passoth, 2019; Witteborn, 2021). This expands the border, continuing the practices of digital inclusion/exclusion, as well as differentiation, and control, into the everyday lives of migrants.

### 2.4.2 Digital Politics and Activism

Digital technologies have also changed the ways in which people organize politically. Since the emergence of the internet, activists and organizers have utilized the digital to advocate for political, social, and economic change. We can identify the first wave of digital activism as related to the early popularization of the internet in the mid 1990s, when tech and alternative media activists, building on a long tradition of alt-media like zines, pirate radio, and underground press, utilized alternative news sites and mailing lists as part of the larger anti-globalization movement. This period also includes the rise of hacker groups, often called hacktivists. This wave corresponds with what is known as “web 1.0” or the static web, and represented what Gerbaudo (2017) calls a “cyber-autonomist” politics, which viewed the internet as “a space to construct islands of resistance outside of the control of state and capital” (p. 485). Overall, the internet was framed as an autonomous space where counter-cultural politics opposed to consumerism and neoliberal hegemony could be built. In contrast, the second wave of digital activism moved away from the idea of the internet as autonomous and independent, and toward an understanding of the inextricable links between the internet and capitalism, as represented by the rise of monopolistic corporate platforms like Facebook and Google. Gerbaudo (2017) has described this form of digital activism, which can be seen in Occupy Wall Street in the US, as “cyber-populism” (p. 486). Instead of creating new autonomous digital spaces, activists “invade” commodified platforms to connect with one another and mobilize coalitions that can then be translated to the “real-world.” In other words, they are aware of the inherently capitalist and commodified nature of the internet and, rather than avoiding it or building infrastructures outside of it, they instead seek to appropriate spaces within it to create “people’s platforms” (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 486). This ideology largely characterizes contemporary social media activism.

Many scholars have discussed the impact of social media on global organizing and social movements (Castells, 2013, 2015; Mortensen, Neumayer, & Poell, 2018). They point to the use of social media to, among other things, raise awareness, form connections between activists and recruit new members, and coordinate and report on real-world political actions. However, they also discuss how social media activism can undermine potential long-term movement effectiveness, as well as how platforms can privilege “spectacular” media over more nuanced and complex content (Blaagaard, Mortensen & Neumayer, 2017), remove or conceal accounts and content that are deemed objectionable (Youmans & York, 2012), and overall pursue moderation and curation policies that are designed to maximize user engagement while not alienating potential advertisers and other commercial interests (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018). Much of the literature on social media activism focuses on specific protest case studies, like Occupy Wall Street (Juris, 2012), the Arab Spring (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011), and Black Lives Matter (Cox, 2017). More recent work has also looked at the impact of social media activism on the genocide in Gaza (Gutknect, 2026; Bany Mohammed, et al., 2025).

Following the work of Raymond Williams (1975), who argues that “new technology is itself a product of a particular social system” (p. 140), research on social media activism is also interested in the ways in which social, political, and economic conditions are co-produced with social media technologies. The co-production and entanglement of social media and activism allows for an understanding of how these technologies can reproduce existing hierarchies of power under racial capitalism, while simultaneously providing the opportunity to challenge these hierarchies through subversion and appropriation of the platforms (Mortenson, Neumayer, & Poell, 2019).

The use of digital technologies to reproduce processes of racial capitalism, including differentiation, exclusion, and expropriation, can result in a kind of techno-pessimism, which views technology as instinctively harmful. However, because technology and society are co-produced, it is important to remember that alternative forms and functions of technology not only exist but provide opportunities for the creation of a more liberatory form of techno-politics. As scholars including Elwood (2020) and Leszczynski (2019) remind us, it is important to open up the politics of technology beyond “hope and fear” framings, to ones which theorize digital worlds as open for re-assembly and as possible sites of radical politics. For example, although locational geodata can be used to enclose parts of the city through geofencing and other exclusionary practices, it can also be used by oppressed populations like street vendors to explicitly articulate their place in cities in the face of discursive and material practices designed to exclude them from both the city as it is, and as it is imagined by planners, city officials, and others engaged in forms of urbanism designed to attract global finance. Understanding the complex socio-technical assemblages and mediations surrounding everyday urban life for people like street vendors allows for an understanding of digital technologies as not only hegemonic, but also as tools with the potential to evade, refuse, and combat the socio-spatial conditions of racial capitalism.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In the chapters that follow, I bring together these literatures to begin to theorize how the digital is implicated in how street vendors both experience and resist racial capitalism within neoliberal cities, including how it relates to processes of differentiation and exclusion. While there is scholarship on the relationship between the digital and informal work (Casey & Hughes,

2016; Mramba et al., 2014), including street vending, much of this scholarship is focused in the global South. This work will therefore focus on the socialities and spatialities of street vending in the North produced by and through the digital, analyzing them under a framework of racial capitalism. This scholarship provides the basis for understanding how under racial capitalism, urban governance practices, including the use of digital technologies, are used to dispossess, criminalize, and exclude vendors, and overall control processes of urbanization in pursuit of neoliberal urban futures which are framed as antithetical to activities like vending. It also lays the groundwork for analysis on how these violent and oppressive paradigms can be resisted by vendors and their allies through practices like digital placemaking and social media activism. These literatures will be referenced and used throughout the analysis chapters, helping us to understand the complex nature of both vending and vending politics.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

This research was guided by four main questions: 1) How do street vendors in Los Angeles experience processes of racial capitalism through interactions with digital technologies? 2) What are the urban ideologies and governance practices that structure the lives of vendors? 3) What does studying street vending in Los Angeles tell us about precarity, differentiation, and exclusion under racial capitalism more generally? 4) And how do vendors work against the domination of racial capitalism and to imagine and create more just and radical spaces and worlds? In order to answer these questions, I conducted field work both on and offline, drawing on a wide variety of data to begin to understand the complex social and spatial conditions of vending and vending politics in LA. In this chapter, I detail the specific methods I used, as well briefly interrogating my positionality as a researcher, including some limitations I faced.

### **3.1 Research Design and Evidence**

In order to grasp the full contours of street vending and street vending activism occurring both online and offline, I employed a mixed methods approach that allowed me to move between the virtual and the real. Mixed methods “rely upon multiple types of data, modes of analysis, or ways of knowing, but may use these elements in a variety of ways in relationship to one another, for multiple intellectual and analytical purposes” (Elwood, 2010, p. 3). Mixed methods were useful for this project because they allowed for fluidity and openness to changing conditions on the ground, while also speaking to the interconnected nature of the online and offline spaces in which vendors and their allies operate.

I employed Burawoy's extended case study method (1998), which allows for developing theoretical claims from inductive analysis of multiple forms of qualitative evidence. The extended case study method attempts to "extract the general from the unique, to move from the 'micro' to the 'macro', and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory" (1998, p. 5). Not only does this method allow for the extension and deepening of existing theorizations from specific, grounded evidence, but it also seeks to connect localized conditions with global forces across space and time. This spatial and temporal aspect is particularly useful to my project, as I am interested in the specific geohistory of LA, and how it has shaped contemporary life in the city, as well as how it has created the contours of possible futures for vending in LA.

My methodology further involves geohistoricization of the local and global conditions and forces of racial capitalism. Geohistoricization allows for a study of the lived experiences of global racial capitalism, of the domination of racial capitalism in everyday life, as well as how it is navigated or resisted. Moreover, geohistoricization allows us to see past the "new" of the digital to see how processes and conditions organized around digital technologies and practices like GPS tracking and the collection of biometric data are not novel or unique but are rather time and place specific manifestations of global racial capitalism. It also helps connect the specific experiences of street vendors with local struggles against global racial capitalism in other times and places. My project, although focused on street vendors in cities in the US, also seeks to connect people, places, and struggles in different places and times, showing how practices of refusal of racial capitalism and hegemonic settler colonialism, and desire of new and different worlds, are enacted and can be connected to create "pluriversal and interspersal decoloniality" (Walsh and Mingolo, 2018, p. 3).

My data was generated through digital ethnography, in-person participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and archival research. Contemporary data was collected on the ground in Los Angeles October-December of 2023, and online during 2023 and early 2024. Online evidence was also collected outside of those time frames when important events occurred in the street vendor community, such as when the vendors won their case against the city in July 2024. Archival research was conducted at the Southern California Library and focused on the Asociacion de Vendedores Ambulantes (Street Vendors Association) Records, 1986-1995, an archive of documents produced and collected by, or pertaining to, the AVA covering the years 1986-1995. In the following sub-sections, I go into more detail on the methods of data collection, as well as how they came to inform my understanding of both contemporary and historic street vending and street vending activism.

### **3.1.1 Digital Ethnography**

The digital components of my project, including digital images, videos, and documents, were assembled as a form of digital ethnography. Digital ethnography can be characterized as one of the following: the use of novel digital ethnographic methods and tools, the study of the internet and networked digital devices and their effects on social life and practice, and the study of digital practices using non media-centric approaches (Duggan, 2017). My research brings together those strands to study the multiplicity of ways in which the digital shapes and affects the everyday lives of vendors. Through the use of digital ethnography, I am attempting to understand how everyday life is being produced and represented in digital spaces through the use of digital media. As Pink et al. (2015) states, “researching digital media practices often actually means researching the relationship between digital media and other things and processes, and considering how the practices through which these are played out become blurred” (p. 57).

Therefore, although much of the data collected through the digital ethnography consist of digital media, my project is interested in the interactions between the digital and the “real”, and understanding how a multitude of everyday relations, including cultural, political, and economic relations, are intractably bound up in the production of digital media.

In order to conduct this digital ethnography, I followed and observed street vendor advocacy and activism on various social media platforms, conducting participant observation in digital spaces. Increasingly, social media platforms allow vendors and their allies to create vast online social infrastructures to challenge negative perceptions, advocate for beneficial policies, and strengthen their social networks among the communities in which they operate, and from where their customers originate. One of the main ways that digital media on and about street vendors are linked is using popular hashtags on platforms such as Instagram, X, TikTok and Facebook, including #ProtectStreetVendors #SupportStreetVendors, and #VendorPower. In order to observe these digital vendor spaces, I followed these and related hashtags on Instagram, X, and TikTok, as well as various predominant street vendor related accounts, including local vendor non-profits and community groups, local high-profile vendor activists, local night markets, street food influencer accounts, and political influencer accounts that advocated for vendors, often in conjunction with other related political causes (many of which were focused on immigrant rights). I also periodically searched the hashtags and other terms related to vending in order to discover new accounts and influencers to follow. By combining a more incidental method of interacting with content as it appears on a social media feed with a more purposeful search of related terms, I attempted to understand the full picture of digital vendor relations at that moment in time. Moreover, by viewing content through scrolling through my feed, I was able to interact with it as a normal user interested in street vending on social media would, an

important facet of participant observation. Participant observation “involves researchers moving between participating in a community--by deliberately immersing themselves into its everyday rhythms and routines...and observing a community: by sitting back and watching activities which unfold in front of their eyes” (Cook, 1997, p. 167-8). Through observation of my social media feeds, as well as limited interactions with accounts and users online, I was able to get a holistic sense of the social relations being created and fostered in these digital spaces, as well as the contours of digital vendor activism.

In addition to the online participant observations, I also investigated the various resources and websites set up by the city to help vendors navigate the complicated bureaucracy required to vend in the city, including permitting. Through this evidence, I hoped to gain a better understanding of not only the complex and often confusing rules and regulations vendors must adhere to, but also the ways in which the city attempts to address this complexity. I also interacted with and used a limited number of apps available to aid vendors, including locational apps and an educational app for vendors developed by the Los Angeles Public Library. This evidence was intended to not only explore digital resources that help vendors sell legally and effectively, but also to examine the role public institutions like libraries play in fostering digital literacy and access for vendors. Additionally, I also attended virtual trainings, community meetings, and city council meetings. Not only did attending these virtual events allow me to witness organizing and activism, but it also provided me with an understanding of the increased access and organizing potential that digital technologies provide to vendors and allies.

Finally, a limited number of online news articles were used to provide further context for events affecting vendors and their allies. This was particularly useful for incidents that occurred

after I left LA, such as the No-Vending Zone lawsuit<sup>2</sup>. It also allowed for an understanding of how events affecting vendors were covered in the media at the time.

### **3.1.2 Participant Observations**

In addition to the online observations I conducted through the digital ethnography, I also conducted in-person participant observations, which were crucial to understanding the interconnected nature of online and offline spaces with regards to vending and vending activism. I observed vendors at work in various locations throughout the city, focusing mainly on Echo Park, Boyle Heights, and Hollywood Boulevard. I chose these areas because they not only have large vending populations, but also because they represent important nodes for city vending politics in the city. Hollywood Boulevard includes a no-vending zone, and thus was at the center of restrictive and exclusionary city vending policies. Similarly, Echo Park is a public space that has also been the site of exclusionary urban practices, including the closure of the park to vendors during Covid. Finally, Boyle Heights has a long history of vending and vending activism, as well as community activism more generally, and is where Inclusive Action is located, meaning that there is a close relationship between vending organizing and the neighborhood. During this portion of the fieldwork, I not only observed vendors interacting with customers, each other, and city representatives, including cops, but I also interacted with the vendors as a customer, purchasing their goods and talking with them about their businesses. The level of interaction was dependent on a number of factors, including location, how busy the vendor was, and language.

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<sup>2</sup> As described in Chapter 1, the original vending ordinance passed in LA in 2018 included restrictive and exclusionary vending bans in seven specific areas in the city, including the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the Hollywood Bowl, and LA LIVE/Crypto.com Arena. It also restricted vending near farmers markets, swap meets, schools, and temporary events. In response to these bans, two vendors, Merlin Alvarado and Ruth Monroy, along with CPC, ELACC, and Inclusive Action for the City, filed a lawsuit in 2022 arguing that the no-vending zones violated SB 946. The plaintiffs were successful in their lawsuit in 2024, resulting in the repeal of exclusionary vending bans across the city, the cancellation of all citations issued for vending in the zones, and full refunds for any vendors who paid fines for vending in those areas.

I also attended and participated in a number of community meetings and trainings, including city council meetings, food-handler trainings, and vendor feedback sessions. These experiences provided useful data on interactions between vendors and the city, as well as vendors and their advocates. In many of these meetings, I also attempted to provide assistance to the organizations in charge whenever possible, both in the spirit of participatory research, as well as an attempt to ensure that my work is materially useful to the communities with which I am thinking and working. By asking “How can I help you? What can I bring to the table?” I aimed to ensure that my relationships with the communities which have welcomed me are not unilateral, but mutually beneficial whenever possible. Although what these communities have provided me in the way of knowledge and assistance is far beyond what I can provide in return, I am hopeful that I was able to help in even some small way.

In addition to these community meetings and trainings, I also observed the day-to-day operations of Inclusive Action for the City, a local non-profit that advocates for street vendors. I was able to observe the work that street vendor advocates were doing both in the office and outside of it, including working with vendors, city officials, and other community organizations. These observations allowed me to gain greater insight into the realities of vendor advocacy, as well as helping me form closer connections with workers at Inclusive Action, which translated into deeper conversations and valuable data.

Throughout these participant observations, I kept detailed textual and photographic field notes that included dates and times, and documented what I observed, as well as my personal reflections and experiences as a participant. These observations also informed the semi-structured interview questions, allowing me to gain further insight from experts on what I

had observed in the field. These observations were also used to form the initial codes for analysis.

### **3.1.3 Semi-Structured Interviews**

While the digital and in-person observations provided the bulk of the data collected, I also conducted a limited number of semi-structured interviews. Ethnography and qualitative interviewing allow the researcher the opportunity to embed themselves in particular communities, forming trusting relationships which allow for better understandings of conditions as they are experienced on the ground. Ethnography and interviewing are also commonly pursued together because the relations created through ethnography often allow for deeper and more intimate conversations. These methods are also attentive to the creation of situated knowledge because they allow oppressed, marginalized, or silenced populations to speak for themselves, allowing researchers to understand phenomena as they are experienced and perceived in grounded ways (Robinson, 2020). Moreover, this means that theory is created from these interactions, from the ground-up, with research guiding theory and not vice-versa (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The interviews were designed to provide context and a deeper understanding of what I had observed, allowing me to not only delve deeper into themes from the online and in-person observations, but also to provide new avenues of inquiry based on the answers provided by the interviewees. Therefore, while I had an interview script with prepared questions drawn from the data and literature, I also allowed the conversation to develop based on the responses given, as well as what the subject wished to discuss. Using snowball sampling based on the relationships I had built with local vendor organizations, I interviewed a total of four vendor organizers who

worked at the Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign-- two employees of Inclusive Action for the City, one lawyer with Public Counsel, and one advocate at CPC, who was also a former street vendor. I also interviewed a current street vendor and her daughter, who translated and provided further context to the conversation, as she often worked alongside her mother as a vendor.

Interviews with vendors and former vendors were designed to investigate their everyday experiences as vendors, including interactions with police and city officials and how they navigate exclusionary city policies, how they interact with digital technologies in their daily lives, and any experiences they had with advocacy and activism. Similarly, interviews with vendor organizers examined their everyday lives as advocates, including the work they do day-to-day, as well as any conflicts or tensions that have arisen within the advocacy community, either internally or externally. I also asked questions on the use of digital technologies in their work, as well as their views on the relationship between vending and the city, and on the biggest issues facing vendors in LA.

### **3.1.4 Archival Research**

While the digital and in-person observations, and the semi-structured interviews provided evidence on contemporary street vending and street vending advocacy in Los Angeles, I am also interested in tracing a longer history of vending and activism in the city, connecting current laws, policies, and conditions of vending with historic ones. To do so, I also conducted archival research at the Southern California Library in South Central Los Angeles, a community library and archive which contains an extensive collection of archival materials related to community resistance and activism in Los Angeles and beyond. As part of their collection, they host the Asociacion de Vendedores Ambulantes (Street Vendors Association) Records, which is

comprised of documents relating to the AVA from the years 1986-1995. Included in this collection are records of meetings, news articles, correspondence between organization members, community members, police, and city officials, documents produced by the association for the public, as well as an oral history of the organization, including the events that ultimately led to its dissolution. At the archive, I examined all the available materials and photographed and took detailed notes on over one hundred relevant documents.

Although I gained valuable data from examining the archive, which provides necessary context and history to the conditions of contemporary vending in LA today, I chose to not focus an extensive amount of analysis on the files I documented, mostly due to the large volume of data collected, as well as the direction the project ultimately took. However, I plan to eventually return to the historic materials I collected to continue my study of the long history of vending in LA. I also think that it is crucially important to share the evidence and stories contained within this archive, which have been so carefully preserved and maintained by the Southern California Library. The experiences of the vendors and association members contained within the archive can tell us so much not only about street vending in LA, but also about activism and urban politics in Los Angeles in the 80s and 90s.

### **3.2 Analysis**

After data collection, data was assembled and organized before being analyzed. Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and then reviewed and edited twice for accuracy. This not only ensured that the transcriptions were accurate but also allowed for a review of the data to identify emergent themes, which were then used in the initial coding process. Interview transcripts, images and notes from the digital ethnography, archival materials (including both

images of documents and notes), and observation notes were then imported into ATLAS.ti software for coding. I followed an inductive approach, building on individual observations to generate theory. However, I did begin with some initial codes generated from concepts from the literature, and an initial review of the data, including “vendor advocacy,” “safety,” “criminalization,” and “digital placemaking.” I then moved into inductive coding, drawing codes from emergent themes from the data, as well as theories and concepts used by interviewees and digital subjects. These included “differentiation,” “on/offline,” “community building,” “solidarity,” and “scale.”

### **3.3 Positionality, Limitations, and Unforeseen Events**

I think it is important to note that I come to this research trained in feminist methodology, and therefore I understand the importance of explicitly naming and discussing my situated standpoint as a researcher. I am a white graduate student who is an outsider to the community that welcomed me, and therefore I understand that my positionality both affords me structural privileges, as well as ensures that there are limitations to my research. One prominent limitation is language—although I have studied it in the past, I speak limited Spanish and was thus unable to comfortably communicate with many of the vendors. This was particularly a problem with regards to the interviews, with the language barrier preventing me from interviewing some vendors I wished to speak with. Although I did have bilingual connections through the organizations I worked with, their ability to translate was limited by their other responsibilities as community organizers. I was lucky enough to have the daughter of the Spanish-speaking vendor I spoke with translate. Moreover, my inability to comfortably communicate did not serve to build

trust in me with vendors and marked me as an outsider. While I was able to have many fruitful conversations with vendors, this was a limitation.

Additionally, I had never been to Los Angeles before traveling there. My initial research into street vending occurred in South Africa, however, due to the pandemic and uncertainty regarding travel and foreign research, I shifted my focus to the United States, and specifically to LA because I had contacts there and conditions were still developing with the new formalization process, making it particularly suitable to study. Although I tried to do as much research as possible on the city, its history and geography prior to arriving, it took me a few weeks out of a relatively short research trip to begin to truly feel comfortable moving through the city, especially when observing vendors. As a result, I did not visit as many field sites as I initially planned, choosing instead to focus on three main ones. Although being unfamiliar with the city made the trip difficult, it also allowed me to see the city with fresh eyes, and to discover ordinary, everyday things that I might have otherwise looked past or taken for granted.

In mid-December, there was also an important event in the street vendor community that not only affected my research but has had a continued impact on digital street vendor activism, as well as left-wing activism in Los Angeles and the surrounding counties. One of the most prominent and well-known vendor activists, a man named Edin “Alex” Enamorado, was arrested alongside seven other activists and accused of organizing and participating in violent protests, and faced charges of conspiracy, assault, and false imprisonment. Dubbed the “Justice 8,” the activists were arrested as part of a months-long joint investigation between the San Bernardino Sheriff’s Department, Fontana Police Department., Pomona Police Department., Upland Police Department, and the Victorville Police Department, which was referred to as “Operation Accountability.” They were held without bail for months, with seven of the eight defendants

eventually reaching plea deals (Enamorado is still awaiting trial in jail). While this event was hugely impactful in the vendor activism community, it also prevented me from contacting or interviewing Enamorado, who is one of the most prominent online activists, and therefore features heavily in the digital ethnographic portion of my research. While the viewpoint of Enamorado would have added valuable data and evidence to my findings, I also accept that this is a limitation out of my control, and I am thus forced to rely on the secondary evidence I have on his work and the ensuing state response.

This event also speaks to the challenges of doing research on conditions that are still developing. Although the initial street vendor state bill was passed in 2018, the years since have consisted of a near-constant effort to implement the new ordinance, pass additional laws, and navigate the complex state and local bureaucracies dictating the lives of vendors in California today. Therefore, even when I was in LA, conditions were constantly changing and thus required me to be highly adaptable to these changes. While this was often challenging, and required flexibility, it also gave me the unique opportunity to see the changes occurring in LA and the surrounding area firsthand, allowing my research to develop in ways I could not have anticipated. Overall, the logistical and practical considerations that structured my research, including the language barrier, my positionality, and a rapidly changing and developing context in LA, affected the outcome of the project in ways I did not foresee, but also forced me to think and act in ways I may not have, providing the opportunity for new avenues to be pursued, and for conclusions to be drawn that may have otherwise been impossible.

## **Chapter 4. Navigating Life Under Racial Capitalism Through Digital Technologies**

December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023 began as a seemingly normal day in Los Angeles for street vendors, activists and their allies. For vendor activists and organizers, like many workers in the United States, the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas are quieter and less active than the rest of the year. It is a time to take stock of and celebrate the accomplishments achieved in the past year, and begin to plan for the upcoming challenges and goals they would begin to tackle in the new year. However, on Thursday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, the state took actions that sent waves not only through the LA street vendor community, but through Southern California activism networks more generally. At around 4am, police from San Bernardino County raided the homes of eight local street vendor activists, including a prominent activist named Edin “Alex” Enamorado. Enamorado was a very well-known local street vendor advocate who had risen to prominence online for his confrontational approach to activism, which included videoing and exposing individuals who harassed and committed violence against vendors, providing armed protection for vendors who had been harassed, and organizing buy-outs and other donation campaigns for victimized vendors. Although his actions were controversial not only for police and city officials, but within larger vendor activist circles, he had amassed a large following online, with his accounts on Instagram and Tik Tok attracting hundreds of thousands of followers and interactions. He also regularly appeared on local news channels as a voice for vendors. Enamorado was an incredibly prolific online activist, posting multiple videos a day, and he was often going “live” on Instagram, including the night of his arrest. In video footage from that night, Enamorado is clearly confused and alarmed, saying “[I] just woke up to a lot of explosions. The cops are outside my house, I don’t know what’s going on” as he gets dressed to

go confront them. He clearly understands the severity of the situation, saying “stay on here [Instagram],” implying that he wants to ensure there are witnesses. Cops then appear and enter his home, accosting him, with the video becoming chaotic before a cop says “leave the phone” and it cuts off altogether (youainthardfoo\_, personal communication, December 14, 2023). This is the last post Enamorado would make on social media.

The eight activists, later dubbed the “Justice 8” by supporters, were charged with a number of felonies related to alleged violence at various protests in San Bernardino County, including assault, false imprisonment, and conspiracy. The police investigation against the activists, named “Operation Accountability,” was a joint action by various police and sheriff departments in Southern California, including Pomona, Victorville, Fontana, and Upland. According to the police, the investigation began after an alleged assault at a Victorville protest and became a multi-department operation when Victorville police linked their suspects with other “violent attacks” at protests in San Bernardino and Los Angeles Counties (@sanBernardinocounty, personal communication, December 4, 2023). Enamorado and the Justice 8 had a long history of organizing throughout Southern California, especially in the Inland Empire, and had recently focused attention on the City of Fontana, which was harassing and criminalizing vendors, and attempting to pass local legislation which would potentially criminalize vendors and impose excessively high costs and fines, violating SB 946.

In the weeks prior to the arrests, Enamorado and other activists had held protests outside the home of Fontana Mayor Aquanetta Warren criticizing her for championing the discriminatory street vendor ordinance, supporting the hiring and use of private security by the city to harass, displace, and dispossess vendors, and reducing the time for Public Comment in city council meetings from three minutes to one, an action which sparked passionate opposition not only

from vendors and their advocates, but also from the community as a whole. Following these protests, the city passed an ordinance that banned protests or picketing within 300 feet of a residence, a move largely seen by the community as directly stemming from the protests against the mayor, with City Councilman Jesse Sandoval, the lone dissenting vote, stating that it was “just for one person. This was just developed for one person” (Victoria, 12/13/23). Overall, the city of Fontana, and the Inland Empire as a whole, was increasingly becoming the focus of vendor activists both online and off, especially as focus was shifting away from Los Angeles, where vendor support had strengthened both within the city government and the larger community. After the success of campaigns in LA, it seemed like the Inland Empire was the next battlefield for vendor activists. However, in the midst of this increased attention and pressure, the state intervened in an attempt to curtail these efforts by eliminating the most high-profile online activists involved.

In addition to the alleged attacks, police made explicit claims that the Justice 8 were not merely violent but were running a large-scale operation designed to fraudulently profit from social media activism. San Bernardino County sheriff Shannon Discus called this “clickbait for cash,” claiming that

videos of the truth were manipulated and put out to the public to make it look like an underserved population was being represented kind of Robin Hood-ish, when in fact there was felonious activity behind this, They have a large following, the more clicks they get, the more money they make as it relates to how the systems that they operate within work. They’re more about not substance for what their issues are but are really getting that clickbait and making money off of that, just like any internet influencer does. (el\_matrix117, personal communication, December 14, 2023)

These claims that the activists were manipulating videos and other content on social media to create false narratives against the police and city officials show the importance placed on digital

activism and social media more generally in the imaginations not only of participants, but of those they oppose as well. Although the charges of assault against the activists were largely unrelated to the alleged online conspiracy, the digital networks created and mobilized by the activists were a huge focus for police from the initial press conference following the arrests. These sensationalized narratives around the online work performed by the Justice 8 begin to give us a glimpse into the close relationship between street vending activism and the digital, which has allowed vendors and their allies to not only articulate their place within a city that has historically sought to exclude them, but also to create strong coalitions around these politics that imagine new forms of urban life.

Moreover, just as the digital has become ubiquitous in everyday life, it has come to serve a multitude of purposes for vendors and their advocates. In addition to social media activism, vendors use digital technologies not only to promote and support their vending businesses, but also to organize both on and offline. Their interactions and experiences with the city outside of code enforcement officials and police are also largely digital, with permitting and other city programs mostly occurring online. Although the digital is now so crucially intertwined with vending practices and policies, it has largely been understudied in literature on street vending, especially in the global North (Chen, 2018). What does the digital mean for vending? What are the intersections between the digital and vending and vending politics? And more specifically, what are the digital mediations and social and spatial relationships they animate and are responsive to? How do digital technologies coproduce the sociospatial relations under which vendors and their allies operate?

This chapter will investigate the different intersections between the digital and vending, focusing on three general roles digital technologies play: in vending itself, including both

business and administrative practices; in organizing vendors; and in online pro-vendor social media activism. In order to analyze these practices, it is important to first address the use of “activism” versus “organizing.” The use of the terms “activism” and “organizing” to describe different practices within larger social movements has been the focus of academic research and debate, both within and outside of the academy, for many years (Featherstone, Henwood, & Parenti, n.d.; McAlevey, 2017; Rudd, 2009; Taylor, 2016). This research is not intended to add to those debates, or advocate for one perspective over the other—the differentiation between activism and organizing is merely a useful way to broadly group vendor advocates, with the understanding that these groups are not discrete in either makeup or action. Many “activists” pursue tactics and practices that this research associates with organizing, and vice-versa. However, for the sake of simplicity, this work differentiates activism from organizing as follows: “activism” describes activities that occur somewhat independently of non-profits, NGOs, and the state. They are largely performed spontaneously, and in reaction to ever-changing conditions. In contrast, organizing describes planned actions performed by, or through, non-profits, often either directly conducted by vendors, or in partnership with them. It also implies a larger long-term plan or program that the actions are occurring in service of-- for example, efforts to pass SB 946, including lobbying state officials, providing feedback on proposed legislation, and ensuring compliance once the bill passed, would be considered organizing. However, actions performed in support of this bill such as the articulation of support for the bill online by a person acting independently of the larger Street Vendor Campaign and its associated groups, would be considered activism. Additionally, I also use “advocates” and “allies” to refer to both activists and organizers interchangeably—whenever these terms are used, I am not distinguishing between the groups but referring generally to people who support vendors.

## 4.1 Digital Technologies and Street Vending Practices

The use of digital technologies in everyday life has become so commonplace that it is nearly impossible to imagine a world in which they are not shaping social, political, and economic relations at every scale, in almost every place. Within both informal and formal economies, digital technologies are simultaneously disrupting and facilitating work and workers, creating a complex network of positive and negative impacts which are constantly changing and evolving. The use of increasingly sophisticated technologies by both formal and informal workers is seen as a crucial means to improve the conditions, productivity, and scale of labor as a whole, facilitating not just positive outcomes for the workers, but for the overall economy (Casey & Hughes, 2016). However, most scholarly focus on the impact of technologies on labor practices has focused on formal labor, analyzing how technological innovations and advancements have affected the system of global production and labor (Chen, 2018). Although this work is important to understanding the complex relationship between technology and labor, increasing precariousness and informality in global labor as a whole means that analyzing the impacts of digital technologies on informal work is crucial. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on informal labor in literature on technology and work, especially due to the critical role that digital technologies play in the gig economy through apps like Uber and Instacart. There have also been a limited number of studies on technology and street vending specifically; however, most of these have focused on the global South, where street vending plays a much more prominent role in the economy, or have looked at vendors operating out of an informality of desire, like food truck owners (Casey & Hughes, 2016; Mramba et al., 2014; Wessel, 2012; Martin, 2014). Therefore, considering the growth of informal labor, including

street vending in the global North, it is useful to begin to conduct a broad overview of how street vendors interact with and utilize digital technologies in their day-to-day labor.

#### **4.1.1 “Do You Have Zelle?” Digital Payment Systems and Street Vending**

The most common use of digital technologies by street vendors is to facilitate payments for goods and services. Vendors utilize digital banking platforms like Zelle, PayPal, Square, Apple Pay, and Venmo to facilitate transactions with customers. In an increasingly cash-free world, this allows vendors to attract and do business with customers who either do not carry cash, or do not have enough on hand when purchasing. This has become even more common during and following the COVID pandemic, with one vendor identifying more people turning away from cash and to digital payments following the global pandemic. Therefore, access to digital payments opens their business up to sales that might have been previously inaccessible, increasing their overall business. As one vendor said, “a lot of people don't carry cash. And everybody always carries their phone.”

However, it is important to note the various forms of differentiation and exclusion that these digital payment systems also often facilitate. There has been extensive work done on how digital-only payment systems are exclusionary of poorer, non-white communities (Bagarella, Batista Schlesinger, Owens, & Rapsilber, 2021). These customers are often unable to access the banking systems that allow for the use of digital payments and therefore are structurally prevented from doing business with firms that do not take cash. Moreover, as stated by the vendor above, it is increasingly becoming normal for many middle to upper class people to not carry cash at all—according to a 2022 survey, 41% of Americans make none of their weekly purchases in cash (Faverio, 2022). Not only does this create a relationship of co-production

between cashless businesses and people, but it also deepens spatial differentiations based on class.

Moreover, although digital payment platforms have become increasingly normal in many places, many vendors are unable or unwilling to use them for a variety of reasons. For some vendors, there are material and logistical barriers to digital banking. Some vendors do not have access to smartphones, which can be prohibitively expensive, and a business cost that many vendors cannot afford. Additionally, access to Wi-Fi and cell service in the city can be uneven, making connecting to digital banking apps difficult. For example, one vendor who sells near stadiums and parks detailed how using digital payments can be especially challenging during concerts, sports games and other large events, because there is often a weak signal due to the sizable crowds. This has a direct effect on the vendor's business—when they are unable to connect to the digital payment apps, they lose customers and thus income.

Furthermore, this unevenness of individual and infrastructural resources for accessing digital banking only serves to amplify already existing inequalities in formalized financial services. Although this change to digital-only payments systems is a relatively new phenomenon, marginalized communities, especially poor and working-class communities, have historically been excluded from formal banking systems (Day, 2022). Contemporarily, lack of access to formal banking is an issue for vulnerable people across the country, including in California, where an estimated 1 in 4 people lack full access to banking (Bagarella, Batista Schlesinger, Owens, & Rapsilber, 2021). This includes not only those who are “unbanked,” but also those who are “underbanked,” which describes people who have bank accounts but also predominantly use financial services outside of the traditional banking system to meet their financial needs. These alternative services include transactional services (nonbank money orders, check cashing,

and international remittances) and alternatives to mainstream credit (rent-to-own services and payday, pawn shop, auto title, and tax refund anticipation loans). Studies have shown that while these alternative financial resources serve a crucial role for people and communities excluded from formal institutions, many of them are predatory in nature and often lead to higher costs for borrowers compared to traditional banking, deepening existing inequalities and structural barriers that prevented them from accessing formal banking in the first place (Karger, 2014).

As mentioned above, this issue disproportionately affects non-white and low-income people—in California, Black and Latino people are two times as likely to be unbanked or underbanked, and 78% of unbanked households make less than \$30,000 a year. Additionally, non-citizen immigrants are far more likely to be unbanked compared to people with citizenship—44% of non-citizens in California are unbanked, and are three times more likely to be unbanked, and 40% more likely to be underbanked. Because many vendors are not only Latino, but also undocumented or not citizens, this represents a significant barrier. Overall, in 2021, there were an estimated 2.9 million unbanked and underbanked non-citizens in California (Bagarella, Batista Schlesinger, Owens, & Rapsilber, 2021).

Following this trend, many street vendors in LA are unbanked, meaning that even though digital payment systems offer opportunities for some vendors, many are excluded from these systems. Literature has shown that informal workers globally are often excluded from formal banking and financial systems (Martinez and Short, 2022). In the US, street vendors do not utilize formal banking systems for a variety of reasons. One main issue that causes many vendors to be unbanked is their status as vulnerable, poor migrants, many of whom are undocumented. While undocumented people can legally open bank accounts, studies have shown the inaccessibility of formal banking services for undocumented workers, as well as immigrants

more generally (Bullock et al., 2020; Rhine & Greene, 2006). Some banks do not allow non-citizens to open accounts, and others require Social Security Numbers (SSNs) to do so, which many undocumented people do not have. However, many banks, including major financial institutions, do accept Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs), which is an identification number provided by the IRS to people who do not have a social security number so they can pay taxes (Illinois Legal Aid, n.d.). One organizer even discussed how some banks allow individuals to open bank accounts with other forms of identification such as consular IDs, expanding access to undocumented people. However, even these institutions are often not utilized by vendors because they do not perform the necessary outreach to migrant communities, meaning there is an overall lack of information and knowledge about these services. In addition to the language barrier which often prevents effective outreach from occurring, the inconsistent and uneven access to banking for undocumented people creates complex and confusing conditions which many vendors do not have the time or capacity to navigate.

Moreover, access to banking for immigrants is increasingly being targeted by anti-immigration politicians such as Tom Cotton, a senator from Arkansas, (Cotton, 2025) who often focus on the perceived financial exploitation of the US by undocumented workers, despite the consistent research showing that undocumented people pay taxes at rates equal to and often higher than US citizens, even though they are often shut-out of the social programs their taxes fund (Quinlin, 2024). The Trump administration has also discussed an executive order that would require banks to collect citizenship information from current and new customers, with Treasury Secretary Scott Bessant stating undocumented immigrants “don’t have a right to be in the banking system” (Miller, 2026). This means that despite the seeming availability of alternative

formal banking structures for the undocumented, in practice, banking access is highly unstable and increasingly unreliable for many migrants.

Additionally, many vendors, along with undocumented immigrants more generally, do not trust formal banking systems in the United States. One reason for this is a fear of not being able to access their funds in case of emergency. This is often directly related to the political situation surrounding immigration in the United States, which is constantly changing and evolving. For example, when immigrants are detained or deported, they can have trouble accessing their bank accounts (Epperson, 2025). Moreover, there have been reports of officials freezing the bank accounts of people they believe to be undocumented, leaving them without the ability to access funds (Marty, 2018). There have been multiple examples of people losing access to their accounts or having them frozen, also known as being “de-banked” for political reasons, including Canadian anti-vaccine protestors in 2022 (Austen, 2022) and a Cop City protestor (Pinto, 2023). Moreover, data collection and state surveillance of financial transactions and accounts is increasingly becoming a concern, especially for immigrant workers. Like the vast majority of online enterprises, digital banking systems collect and utilize data for a variety of purposes, including profit (GAO, 2020). Banks also share data with the government when there is a suspicion of illegal activity or behavior (Bush, 2018). This data collection and tracking has serious implications for immigrants in the US, especially with recent attacks on immigrant communities and increasing numbers of detainments and deportations. Digital banking therefore presents opportunities for both mass and targeted data collection of increasingly vulnerable and persecuted people.

The lack of traditional, formal bank accounts for many vendors creates conditions where access to digital payments systems is differentiated, with only some vendors able to access the

financial benefits that they provide. However, in spite of these disparities, vendors are often finding techniques and strategies to navigate and confront this issue. For example, many vendors rely on friends or other vendors who do have access to bank accounts and therefore digital payment systems, using their apps to make transactions with customers. The person with the digital payment apps will then either send them the money, or take it out as cash, and give it to the vendors directly. This process can be planned, but it can also be situational—one paleta vendor I observed was approached by a woman who did not have any cash, and instead of losing her business because he could not accept digital payments, another nearby fruit vendor offered to act as a middleman, taking her payment and then giving the vendor cash.

Similarly, some vendors have begun to operate in this way on a more permanent basis, with one vendor who has a bank account creating a Zelle account that is then shared by multiple vendors. In many of these cases, the Zelle account is posted on multiple vendors' carts as a payment method, showing that this strategy is crucially important to these vendors' livelihoods. This can be seen as a form of informal banking. Although informal banking is often rightly associated with exploitative and predatory financial services like payday loans, it has also historically allowed marginalized or excluded populations alternative access to banking. For example, in the 1800s, informal banks provided financial services to immigrant communities and residents of ethnic urban enclaves, and during the Civil Rights Era, Black Americans often utilized informal banks (or "ethnic banks") because of the racial discrimination and segregation of formal banks (Monreal, 2023).

These kinds of communal acts of solidarity within the vendor community represent ways that vendors are navigating and mitigating the exclusionary nature of digital technologies under capitalism in their everyday lives. The strategies they pursue to utilize systems they are

structurally prevented from accessing mirror the informal nature of their work, and informality more generally as a form of work often pursued by those excluded from, or made surplus to, the formal economy. It is also a form of politics of everyday life (Ginsborg, 2005; Lefebvre, 2014; Ross, 2023), a refusal to adhere to the political barriers that have been forced upon them by the state. It is important to note that this process is not always wholly altruistic—frequently vendors will take a small transaction fee (usually about a dollar or less) when other vendors utilize their payment systems. Although this can be seen as consistent with banking under capitalism more generally, for many vendors this is related to the higher taxes they typically must pay if they are facilitating transactions for other vendors. Additionally, some apps like Square charge processing fees, taking a percentage of each transaction. Therefore, this should not necessarily be read as profit seeking behavior from vendors, but instead as an improvisational digital politics of mutual support and solidarity within a system that is disadvantageous to all. Because of the increased taxes and fees that vendors who assist with digital transactions often face, their continued cooperation represents a form of everyday politics which recognizes solidarity and community between vendors as important in the face of exclusionary capitalism.

However, it is important to remember that racial capitalism is constantly evolving and adapting based on specific temporal and spatial conditions. The mutual support between vendors described above allows them to circumvent and resist a system from which many vendors are excluded. However, in response to this strategy, code enforcement has begun to pursue actions that undermine these efforts through issuing multiple citations. As one organizer explained, when enforcement agents cite a cart that has a shared Zelle account posted, they will sometimes not only cite the owner of the cart, but also the owner of the account, even if they have not broken the law. These actions are reminiscent of the use of RICO against gangs and activists, which

often use tenuous connections to charge people who have little to no connection with the alleged crimes being committed. For example, in 2023 the state of Georgia brought RICO charges against 61 activists who it alleged participated in the Stop Cop City protests and occupation, classifying “the provision of mutual aid, the advocacy of collectivism, and even the publishing of zines” as evidence of participation in a criminal enterprise (Bruce & Shamsi, 2023). Similarly, the mutual aid networks created by vendors are being used to persecute vendors who are compliant with local laws—according to an organizer, “it’s not like you’re a gang, or like, you’re even, that you’re an organized like franchise of restaurants. You just literally, only one of you has a Zelle account.” This organizer also points to an inability to understand different or new social relations vendors are informally building. As she describes, vendors who are paid out from mutual Zelle accounts are often framed as employees being paid a wage, following a traditional framework of brick-and-mortar businesses. This is because as she argues “our system is not set up in order for people to think innovatively or creatively about things that like it could.” This limited imaginary of informal, alternative relations is an issue that vendors face not only regarding digital payments, but also in other aspects of their work and lives in the city.

#### **4.1.2 Digital Administration Practices**

Aside from financial transactions, the other main way that vendors utilize digital technologies for their routine business practices is in administration. In order to legally vend in the city of LA, vendors must acquire multiple permits and certificates, with the number depending on what they are selling. Although vendors can go in person to acquire these permits, each one is issued by a different agency and thus would necessitate vendors to travel to multiple locations, which often imposes time and financial constraints on vendors, especially those who do not have access to private transportation. This can be especially onerous because the permits

must be renewed every year. Therefore, for many vendors, applying and renewing online is far easier and more affordable.

However, using online application systems presents its own challenges and issues for vendors. Most significantly, many vendors do not have access to reliable internet connections or technologies, necessitating trips to public libraries or other facilities that provide internet access. Moreover, throughout the fieldwork, the lack of digital literacy for many vendors was a consistent issue discussed by organizers. For vendors who are not comfortable using digital devices and systems, navigating the often complex and complicated online permitting systems can be very difficult. To apply for a street vending permit, vendors must acquire numerous permits, each of which require their own specific applications and documentation. For example, in order to sell food from a mobile cart, or operate what the city calls a Compact Mobile Food Operation (CMFO), vendors must apply for, and acquire, multiple permits, including a Public Health Permit. In order to get this one permit, vendors must first determine their level of “operation risk” (exempt, low, moderate, or high) based on what food they are selling, how and where that food is prepared, and cart type, which determines which specific permits they require. Once they have done so, they can then create and submit an application for the city to inspect their CMFO plan, as well as a planned food menu, and a “plan check fee,” or a payment for the city to inspect their plan. Once the city has inspected the plan, and the vendor has made any required changes, they can then begin construction on their cart. Once construction is complete, vendors then submit a Commissary Contract (which details the shared space where the food will be prepared), a Public Health Permit application, ownership identification documents (photo ID, etc.), and any other necessary documentation. There are also multiple fees required at this time. Once this step has been completed, the Department of Public Health conducts in-person

inspections of the cart and other equipment and facilities, and upon approval, finally issues approval of the CMFO (County of Los Angeles Public Health, n.d.). This is not the only permit mobile food vendors must acquire—they also need a Business Tax Registration Certificate (BTRC), a seller's permit from the state, as well as a Streets LA Vending Permit from the city, all of which require their own complex permitting processes, as well as fees. They must also acquire a food handler's permit from an accredited organization, which requires attending a training session and passing an exam. Many of these sessions and exams are also online.

This process is not only time-consuming, but because different operations require different permits and documentation, it can also be very difficult for vendors to determine what they are actually required to submit. While there are numerous online resources created by the city, the state, and local non-profits on how to complete this process, organizers discussed how for vendors with limited experience with, and knowledge of, the internet, these resources can be largely inaccessible and ineffective. This is particularly an issue for older vendors. For many vendors, there is also an inherent lack of trust in the digital systems themselves. Applying for permits in-person seems to ensure that their applications are being received and processed by a real person, rather than potentially being lost in digital space. These fears are compounded by the lack of knowledge about the digital systems themselves, and the black boxing of technology more generally. They are also not unfounded—for example, one vendor detailed how she now does all her applications and permitting in-person after being told that her online application did not submit, leaving her operating illegally without a permit for a period of time. Moreover, because of the fees required at each step, the disappearance of her application meant that she was required to pay the fees twice, a significant financial burden for many vendors. The lack of digital literacy can also put vendors at risk of being the victim of scams. Currently on the website

for the LA County Department of Economic Opportunity, the county's main online resources for permit applications, there is a box at the top of the page warning that registered vendors are being targeted by phishing emails requesting business information. Because many street vendors not only lack digital literacy but also do not speak English well or at all, these phishing emails pose a real danger. While this is not directly a result of online permitting, as phishing campaigns can originate from many online sources, it does show the added complexities digital systems add to an already complicated permitting process.

As mentioned above, vendors are required to re-apply for permits yearly, meaning that their livelihoods are dependent on the efficacy of the digital application systems every year. In addition to this, vendors are also required to provide route and schedule information to the Department of Public Health, informing them of when and where they will be vending, including any movements. Because many food vendors are mobile, their schedules and routes can be irregular and constantly changing, meaning that they need to constantly update the city on new routes and schedules. Once again, the mechanisms for doing this are online—they can complete an online form, register with, and provide updates to, a private company called Best Food Trucks, or post any route/schedule changes on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Yelp. Depending on the level of mobility of the vendor, this process can be weekly, or even daily, meaning the vendor must use digital systems consistently and repeatedly.

Although the barriers to accessing digital devices and systems required to legally vend in LA prevent many vendors from operating within the law, creating and deepening divisions between vendors, there are attempts to mitigate these issues by local non-profits and organizers. Member organizations of the LA Street Vendor Coalition, including Inclusive Action and CPC, regularly hold digital and financial literacy trainings. At these trainings, vendors are trained on

how to efficiently use digital devices like computers and smartphones, as well as digital payment systems, including the benefits such systems can offer to vendors. They also hold formalization clinics, in which vendors are able to complete online trainings and application processes, including food handler trainings, while simultaneously improving their digital literacy. These clinics are especially beneficial because they offer vendors an opportunity to navigate and complete complex digital processes with the aid of staff and volunteers, ensuring that they are properly completing all the required steps. Many of these trainings are held at branches of the LA Public Library, which has an entire library program called *Be a Successful Vendor*, which is designed to aid vendors in accessing permits and vending successfully. On the library website, vendors can watch recorded videos on obtaining permits and vending legally, as well as access resources on running a small business, obtaining legal help if they were the victim of a crime, and other crucial aspects of vending. The library also offers educational courses through an app called “Cell-Ed,” which provides micro-courses on general business and internet skills, including attracting customers, creating a budget, navigating webpages, creating email accounts, and understanding digital banking systems. These programs, trainings, and clinics have been essential tools facilitating the implementation of the legal vending process in LA, ensuring that vendors are able to access and utilize the digital bureaucratic systems necessary for legal vending.

In addition to the logistical issues with the online application and permitting processes that prevent or impede their use by many vendors, there are also issues associated with the data collected by digital permitting systems. In order to apply for permits, vendors must provide a large amount of personal data, as well as constantly update the city on their location and movements. This data often goes beyond what is usually required for brick and mortar

businesses. Some municipalities require more invasive data collection, including biometric data like fingerprints, from vendors to access permits. For example, Huntington Park, a city in South Central LA County, requires LiveScan fingerprinting of every sidewalk vendor (City of Huntington Park, n.d.). Ostensibly a safety measure designed to protect local communities by preventing people with criminal records from vending, this ordinance operates on very biased logic, pre-coding the vendor as outside the community, and thus potentially a danger.

This collection and storage of very sensitive personal biometric information presents a very real danger for many vendors, especially immigrant vendors. The collection of data, especially biometric data, has historically been used to target, control, and oppress marginalized populations (Benjamin, 2019; Breckenridge, 2014; Browne, 2015). Data collection represents a particular threat to immigrant and undocumented vendors, who must be hyper-vigilant about the inclusion of their data into increasingly anti-immigrant surveillance systems and networks. As an attorney and organizer with Public Counsel states, “For folks that are undocumented, they’re very scared to submit their fingerprints to anything because you don’t know where the results are going to go” (Verano, 2024). The location and schedule information also provides the state with the means to easily track and locate vendors during operating hours, which is particularly dangerous to immigrant vendors with the increased ICE and DHS enforcement activity in LA. In an attempt to protect this vast amount of personal data, and therefore immigrant vendors, local vendors and organizers lobbied the state to pass State Bill 635, which prevents local jurisdictions from

1) sharing the personal identifiable information of sidewalk vendors except pursuant to a valid subpoena or court order, 2) aiding or cooperating with any agency conducting immigration enforcement; and 3) inquiring into citizenship or immigration status or requiring the completion of background checks or fingerprinting requirements in order for sidewalk vendors to receive their local vending permits. (Public Counsel, 2025b)

This ordinance went into effect on January 1, 2026. Not only does it prevent the sharing of data with immigration enforcement agencies, it also prohibits the collection of biometric data from vendors. However, while this ordinance is currently in effect, many municipalities have not yet implemented it—for example, as of the writing of this dissertation in May, 2026, Huntington Beach still has documentation on their website claiming that Live Scan fingerprinting is required for a vending permit. While it does take time for local governments to change their ordinances to adhere to state law, the protracted and often contentious process of ending illegal street vending bans and limitations in many municipalities in California following the passage of SB 946 seems to suggest that some local authorities may continue to collect and share data until they are legally ordered to stop.

#### **4.1.3 Digital Marketing and Digital Placemaking**

In addition to financial transactions and administration, vendors also utilize digital technologies for marketing and advertising their businesses. Like many small businesses, many vendors are constantly seeking new customers through the use of online marketing, especially on social media. For example, many vendors regularly post where and when they will be at certain locations, in an attempt to attract both local and non-local customers. This is especially true of more popular vendors, including most prominently taco trucks, which are often in high demand, with long lines and limited quantities of food. However, it is not just high profile vendors who post on social media—smaller vendors offering things like fruit, elote, esquites, and snacks also often post their locations and what they are selling on websites and apps like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. One vendor, who is also an organizer with CPC, identified the legalization of vending as one factor in the rise of social media marketing for vendors. Now that vending is

legal, vendors are able to publicly name and market their businesses without fear of criminalization by the state. However, it is also important to understand that de jure legality does not always lead to de facto legality—as discussed throughout the dissertation, permitted vendors are still often subject to unlawful harassment and persecution from police and code enforcement agents. Moreover, threats of immigration enforcement are always present for immigrant vendors, regardless of status. Therefore, vendors who advertise using locational information are engaging in a kind of vulnerability-livelihood dialectic. While posting their presence in spacetime is vital to their ability to make a living, it also exposes them to increased vulnerability and risk within the current conditions of increased racial profiling, detention, and deportation.

The rise of social media food influencers who frequent street food vendors has also increased public awareness of vending and served as informal advertising and marketing for vendors. These influencers are constantly searching for previously unknown vendors in an attempt to gain views and followers in a highly competitive social media landscape. This mutually beneficial relationship between influencers and vendors attracts new customers to the vendors, with many vendors going “viral” as a result. Moreover, influencers do not only draw attention to individual vendors, but to entire neighborhoods and areas as well, attracting non-local customers from all over, including some people who travel explicitly to visit highly publicized areas. For example, Bonnie Brae street in Westlake, near MacArthur Park, recently drew online attention for its street food, including its night market. The area, in what is sometimes referred to as “Little Central America,” is host to numerous food vendors, many of whom are Guatemalan and Mayan, and hosts a popular night market. Long a common area for day laborers and other locals to purchase food including *tostadas*, *hilachas* (stewed beef), and *tamales*, Bonnie Brae began to attract more non-local customers after numerous TikTokers and

Youtubers visited and posted content on the area. The Guatemalan Night Market is now a popular destination for both locals and tourists, and has been written up in prominent news outlets including the *LA Times* and the *New York Times* (Hernandez, 2023; Rao, 2019) .

In addition to materially supporting their businesses, these kinds of activities can also be seen as examples of digital placemaking. Not only are vendors and their allies advertising their businesses to attain more customers, but they are also using social media to explicitly articulate their place in the city. In contrast with perceptions that they are foreign, dangerous, and undesirable, vendors are marketing themselves as important economic and cultural urban actors. Moreover, they are expressly claiming parts of the city like Bonnie Brae as home to vibrant vending communities which not only benefit the neighborhoods but play an integral role in the production of the cultural urban landscapes they contain. Without vendors, Little Central America would not exist in the same way it does today.

## **4.2 Digital Technologies and Vendor Organizing**

For vendors, digital devices are often used to facilitate and support their vending businesses, allowing them to more easily vend legally and successfully, and thus support themselves and their families. However, the use of digital devices and systems has also been essential for vendor organizers, who play a crucial role in ensuring that vendors in LA are able to operate safely, within the law, and without fear of harassment.

### **4.2.1 WhatsApp-ening: Digitally Communicating with Vendors**

One prominent use of digital technologies by vendor organizers is communicating with vendors. Because of the expansive geographies that vendors operate within, both inside and

outside of LA County, meeting and communicating with vendors in person can be difficult. Digital communication devices and apps mitigate this barrier, allowing organizers to disseminate information and discuss urgent matters with vendors quickly and efficiently. The main application utilized by organizers is WhatsApp Messenger, commonly called WhatsApp, a free messaging, voice, and video calling service owned by Meta. The app offers end-to-end encryption, a security measure in which messages are only accessible to the sender and receiver. It also doesn't store any personal information and allows for easy group messaging (eSafetyCommissioner, n.d.). Organizers describe how the app is particularly useful because it allows for the easy sharing of images and files, something which is crucially important for their work. For example, organizers often help vendors successfully navigate the complex permitting system, and thus frequently send vendors digital copies of permitting applications for them to download and fill out.

They also identify the ability to quickly and efficiently communicate with large numbers of vendors at the same time as crucial to organizing efforts. Organizers are constantly working to ensure that the voices and opinions of vendors themselves are centered within the larger movement, and thus the ability to rapidly solicit and receive feedback and perspectives from vendors is critical. For example, one organizer described how, prior to the passing of SB 972, vendors were often charged with misdemeanors for violations of the Retail Food Code, a charge which did not apply to brick-and-mortar food establishments. In reaction to this, organizers reached out to vendors to solicit their thoughts and opinions on this inconsistency, and the feedback from vendors was overwhelmingly that this was not equitable, creating disparities not only between vendors and brick-and-mortar businesses, but also within vending communities themselves, as it targeted only food vendors. Their message overwhelmingly was that

decriminalization should apply equally to all vendors, and thus eliminating criminal charges for food vendors became a central priority for the movement, culminating in the passage of SB 972.

One prominent reason why WhatsApp is the chosen communication app for organizers is the high level of comfort and familiarity with the app many vendors already possess. Internationally WhatsApp is extremely popular, with more than three billion active users a month. Excluding China, where WhatsApp is banned, approximately half of the world's population over the age of 14 use the app (Knight, 2026). While WhatsApp is traditionally less popular in the United States, studies have shown that it is utilized disproportionately by Latino users (46% use it), compared to White users (16%) (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). One reason for this is that it provides an easy platform to communicate with people in other countries. This, combined with its widespread use outside of the US, makes it especially popular for diaspora communities, who may have many friends and families abroad (Trauthig & Woolley, 2025). This includes many in the LA street vendor community, which contains a large number of immigrants, especially Latino immigrants. Because many vendors rely on WhatsApp for everyday communication, they generally have a higher level of confidence with, and knowledge of, the app compared with others. This is especially important because, as described, many vendors, especially older vendors, do not possess a high level of digital literacy. Therefore, using a platform they are already comfortable with alleviates some of the disparities in digital communication within vending communities.

The Signal end-to-end encryption feature of WhatsApp also potentially allows for greater protection of communications between vendors and organizers, as well as any data shared within the app. This is particularly important amid the criminalization and repression of immigrant communities in the US that has escalated under the Trump administration. As increasing

numbers of migrants are targeted and persecuted by ICE and other federal agencies, the protection of personal information and other crucial data are more important than ever. However, studies (Botha, Wout & Leenen, 2019) have shown that messenger apps that use end-to-end encryption can still leave users vulnerable—for example, Meta, which owns WhatsApp, is currently being sued by WhatsApp’s former head of security, who claims that employees are able to access sensitive user data such as profile pictures, locations, group memberships, and contact lists. He also alleges that the company has failed to stop mass account hacks, claiming that more than 100,000 accounts are hacked per day (Kang, 2025). Based on these claims, although the content of conversations on WhatsApps may still be encrypted, the metadata, including who is communicating, when they are communicating, and where they are communicating from can still be read by WhatsApp and shared with Meta. The fact that this locational data, which can be cross-referenced with other information to re-identify users, may be accessible has serious implications for users, especially immigrants and other vulnerable people whose locations may be particularly sensitive or require confidentiality (Rocher, Hendrickx, & de Montjoye, 2019).

One example of the danger of locational data is the claim from the Palestinian digital rights group Sada Social that Israel is accessing and using WhatsApp data to target Palestinians. The group alleges that one of the inputs into Israel's AI system “Lavender,” which identifies targets for airstrikes, “relies on data collected from WhatsApp groups containing names of Palestinians or activists who are wanted by ‘Israel’” (Sada Social, 2024). There are also claims that other Israeli AI systems, including one called “Where’s Daddy,” also gather and process data from WhatsApp (Andolou Agency, 2024). While Meta denies the accuracy of these reports, claiming that “WhatsApp has no backdoors and we do not provide bulk information to any government,” experts have detailed how Israel could gain access to WhatsApp data through

spyware and hacking, informants, and captured devices (Andolou Agency, 2024). This shows the vulnerability of the mass amounts of data collected by tech firms like Meta-- as Bahraini activist Esra'a Al Shafi writes, "by the very act of collecting this information, they're making themselves vulnerable to abuse and intrusive external surveillance" (Conley, 2024).

Perhaps even more concerning regarding privacy and WhatsApp is a more recent lawsuit filed in January 2026 by a group of international plaintiffs alleges that even the privacy claims of encrypted end-to-end messages are false, stating that Meta and WhatsApp "store, analyze, and can access virtually all of WhatsApp users' purportedly 'private' communications" (Bleiberg, 2026). Meta has had a long history of privacy concerns—in 2019, the FTC found that Meta (then Facebook) violated a 2012 FTC settlement by "deceiving users about their ability to control the privacy of their personal information" (FTC, 2019). As a result, the FTC imposed on Facebook a record \$5 billion penalty fee, as well as new privacy requirements, including regular independent auditing, new limitations on data sharing, and required privacy reviews of all new and modified products, including WhatsApp (FTC, 2019). Moreover, because warrantless wiretaps were legalized under Section 702 of the FISA Amendment Act, the federal government can request data from companies like Meta. Because these companies are engaged in large-scale data harvesting, this means that the federal government has access to the largest mass surveillance system ever created and can access user data without the user's permission or even knowledge in some cases (Koch, 2024). One recent investigation on federal data requests has shown that in late 2025, over the span of a few months, the Department of Homeland Security sent hundreds of subpoenas for the personal user data of accounts that have criticized ICE to various tech companies, including Google, Reddit, Discord, and Meta (Frenkel & Issac, 2026). Moreover, the federal government is increasingly pursuing programs and policies that allow it to access and

utilize personal data outside of the purview of privacy law—for example, ICE recently re-instated a contract with the Israeli spyware firm Paragon Solutions, who sell a phone-hacking tool called Graphite that previously has been used by the Italian government to attack journalists with iMessage and WhatsApp attacks (Andringa, 2025).

Concerns about data privacy are magnified by the introduction and proliferation of AI into platforms that harvest data. Meta’s AI product, called Meta AI, is currently embedded in various Meta platforms, including WhatsApp. While the company claims that the technology is not able to access encrypted end-to-end chats, it does use other data including AI prompts and feedback for training. WhatsApp also offers a service called “Private Processing,” which allows for the use of Meta AI for “processing messages off-device in a confidential and secure environment where no one, not even Meta or WhatsApp, can read or access your personal messages” (WhatsApp, n.d.). However, even with these privacy and security claims, there are still concerns about the effect of Meta AI on the safety of private data—for example, Facebook users have reported that MetaAI has scanned unpublished photos from their camera roll without permission, which is related to a larger issue where many tech companies automatically allow AI and other data-related tools to access and harvest data without explicitly obtaining permission from users—they instead require users to “opt-out” of these programs. Because the imposition of services is not always widely publicized, many people are not aware that their data is accessible and being harvested by companies without their explicit permission (Constantinescu, 2025). For vendors, many of whom have little digital literacy, this poses a significant risk. Moreover, this is even an issue for vendors who are familiar and comfortable with digital platforms. Because tools like WhatsApp are vital for both earning and organizing, their use represents a kind of silent or tacit adverse incorporation of vendors into these potentially dangerous systems—even if they are

aware of the risk inherent in the platforms, compared with the immediate risk of the loss of income or weakening of organizing relationships, the less-familiar risk of data privacy might be seen as less dangerous and therefore preferable. Consequently, even vendors who understand the vulnerability of these systems must make strategic decisions about their use, meaning they are often unable to escape the overwhelming dominance of commodified platforms in their everyday lives.

#### **4.2.2 Digitally Building and Growing the Movement**

Digital technologies were also instrumental in the maintenance and growth of the street vendor movement during the Covid 19 pandemic and quarantine. Numerous organizers at non-profits including CPC and Inclusive Action detailed how digital platforms and tools including Zoom allowed them to continue organizing work during the Pandemic, when in-person organizing was largely impossible. At the time, organizers were focusing on modifying the existing retail food code to make it fairer for food vendors, many of whom were unable to access permits, a battle which eventually led to SB 972. In order to best represent the needs and desires of vendors in this process, organizers used Zoom to constantly check in with vendors and get their opinions and approval on various sections and amendments to the bill. Moreover, although the pandemic facilitated the use of Zoom, the remote video conferencing platform proved to be highly useful for organizers even after the quarantine had been lifted and in-person meetings were possible again. The nature of street vending means that vendors are often working in geographically large areas, at a variety of times of day and night. Therefore, finding times and locations that are convenient for all vendors can be very challenging, especially due to the traffic and commuting issues that plague much of LA. By using Zoom, vendors can attend meetings and workshops from anywhere in the city, and work around their schedules, creating higher

attendance rates. Many vendors even attend meetings from the streets while vending, using their phones and other handheld devices. Additionally, it attracted new membership and participation from vendors who were not previously involved in organizing efforts, bringing a wider and more representative perspective to the work. For example, some vendors with children, especially female vendors, were generally unable to attend in-person meetings due to childcare needs—moving the meetings online allowed them to participate and thus added their important perspectives to discussions on vending issues.

Vendor organizers also frequently use online social media platforms to build coalitions, disseminate important information about meetings, organizing efforts, and legal changes, and to shift public opinions about vendors by putting “a face to the issue.” This allows them to connect with vendors and allies across space, bringing together people who may be both geographically and socially distant. It also serves a vital role in humanizing vendors to both lawmakers and the public—by publicizing vendor’s stories, organizers can show the actual issues and struggles that vendors face in Southern California. Presenting vendors as actual people played an important part in the passage of SBs 946 and 972. In order to convince lawmakers of the necessity of passing the bills, organizers brought vendors to the state legislature to tell their stories. Hearing their experiences from the vendors themselves allowed elected officials to see them as real people, rather than abstracted economic actors, and provided them with a space in which they could empathize with the struggles vendors face. Digital technologies replicate this process on a mass scale, spreading vendor stories across time and space, changing negative public perceptions of vendors, and creating networks of support.

### **4.3 Digital Technologies and Online Vendor Activism**

Similar to organizers, vendor activists also utilize social media. However, while the organizers primarily use it to advertise events and workshops, disseminate information about current and future tactics and plans, including legal cases and fights, and celebrate legal and political victories, activists tend to use social media in more pro-active ways, raising consciousness about ongoing struggles and creating coalitions around these issues. Often these pro-vendor online activists are also deeply ingrained within larger justice movements, connecting their pro-vendor work with other struggles. For example, many social media activist influencers who post about street vending also post more generally about Latino politics, including immigration. This serves to ground vendor activism within larger conversations around the experience of Latino people in the US, as well as bringing awareness about street vending politics to larger online communities. It also frames vending politics in particular ways based on who is posting—for example, activist influencers with large Latino communities might focus more on the cultural practices and subjectivities produced through and around vending, while urbanist accounts may focus more on issues of access to public space. The communities within which pro-vendor social media activism occurs are also spatial in nature—often accounts are concerned with politics in specific places, such as LA or the Inland Empire, or California more generally. This allows for not only an understanding of the specific place-based conditions of vending, but also of the activists as representing often hyper-localized politics and perspectives.

#### **4.3.1 Eyes on the Streets: Recording Violence Against Vendors**

Because of the localized nature of their activism, many online pro-vendor accounts serve to draw attention to local issues and problems faced by ignored or overlooked populations that

might typically not be covered within traditional media. For example, many activists focus on highlighting and combating violence against vendors by posting and re-posting videos and testimonies from victimized vendors. They frequently post videos taken by vendors and the public of violence, often crowdsourcing personal information about the perpetrators, and calling for them to be held legally responsible. They also often organize real-world responses to violent events through social media, including buy-out events where the public comes together to support victimized vendors by purchasing their goods. These events often include live music and other forms of entertainment that create a festival-like atmosphere, bringing together the community in support of vendors.

This focus on violence can be seen as responsive to growing levels of violence against vendors. In recent years, there has been an uptick in reported cases of violence against vendors—between 2020 and 2023, LAPD reported data shows that attacks on street vendors more than doubled, from 141 reported cases to 299 (LAPD, 2026). These numbers are likely an undercount, as many victims are often hesitant to report crimes due to factors including immigration status, language barrier, and fear of reprisal or retaliation. However, some organizers and activists have questioned if violence is actually rising, or if the higher numbers are a result of increased reporting as legalization is rolled out and solidified. Many vendors who were previously operating illegally can now report crimes to the police without fear that they will be persecuted for illegal vending (that is not to say that the fear of police and state violence overall has disappeared—many vendors still mistrust official enforcement agencies, which will be further discussed in the next chapter). Another reason for these increased numbers that vending organizers point to is the increased capacity to capture and publicize violence using handheld digital devices. Because the vast majority of smart phones now contain cameras,

vendors and onlookers can easily and quickly film violence and harassment, not only collecting evidence of crime, but also drawing greater public attention and awareness through dissemination on social media. However, although there are many videos of violence against vendors online, the majority of violence against vendors is not recorded, leading other organizers and activists to believe that the true level of violence against vendors is still underappreciated. Therefore, the amount of violent acts committed against vendors are still difficult to ascertain.

Many videos and other content posted and shared by larger activist accounts show vendors being verbally and physically assaulted, with some showing vendor's carts and products being attacked and even destroyed. The violence shown on these videos can vary from more moderate (a university security guard yelling at a flower vendor on campus and spraying him with "fecal scented spray") (firstgensafety, personal communication, November 6, 2023), to the more extreme (a man stabbing flower vendor in Inglewood) (enamoradoalex\_, personal communication, November 2, 2023). Activists frequently collect and disseminate these videos, calling for support for the victims, including monetary support through platforms like GoFundMe, a financial crowdsourcing website. They also often call on the public to identify the perpetrators, and hold them to account, often by confronting them in person, contacting their places of employment and calling for their termination, and demanding legal consequences for their actions. One example of this is a video of a man claiming to be in a leadership position at a gentleman's nightclub called Plan B in Sawtelle on the Westside of LA. In the video, he is confronting taco vendors who are operating down the street from the club, demanding that they leave the sidewalk and threatening to call the police. It is important to note that although the vendors were operating legally with regards to location, the technicalities of the law often are not relevant to threats of engaging law enforcement. The man harassing the vendors continues to

speak loudly and at times yell at the vendors for multiple minutes and eventually steals their generator and walks away with it. In response to this harassment and property theft, many commenters posted the Yelp page for the club, as well as its address and phone number, calling for the public to not only leave negative reviews on Yelp, but also to physically protest the club (enaroradobackup, 2023b). The man was subsequently identified, and his social media accounts were posted online. Additionally, some accounts also noted that he publicly supported right-wing politicians, including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, and causes, such as Blue Lives Matter, linking his anti-vendor politics with right-wing politics as a whole.

Another highly-publicized example of filming vendor harassment is a 2023 video of a man berating a halal vendor using Islamophobic and xenophobic language, including calling for the murder of children in Gaza. He also threatened the vendor, claiming that he has connections with Mukhabarat, the Egyptian secret police, saying “The Mukhabarat in Egypt will get your parents. Does your father like his fingernails? They’ll take them out one by one” (Sabir, 2023). Although this video is from New York, not LA, many activists based in LA and California more generally posted about and magnified the video, contributing to it going viral. This shows the expansive spatiality of vending politics, especially online—although vending conditions in New York and LA are very different, there is an understanding of the shared experiences of being a vendor in the US under hegemonic racial capitalism. It also occurred shortly after the October 7<sup>th</sup> Hamas attack, and during the early days of the current Israeli genocide in Gaza, contributing to its virality. The video, filmed by the Halal vendor, quickly went viral, and the man was tied to a number of other Islamophobic attacks against other vendors. This case could have been just another example of vendor violence going unpunished, however, because of the viral video, the man was quickly identified as Stuart Seldowitz, the former acting director for the National

Security Council's South Asia Directorate, a former member of the US State Department's Office of Israel and Palestinian Affairs, and ex-Obama advisor. Based on the video evidence, Seldowitz was arrested and charged with two counts of fourth-degree hate crime/stalking and one count of second-degree harassment and was fired from his job at Gotham Government Relations, a New York lobbying firm. However, he reached a plea deal to undergo a 26-week anti-bias training, which the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) criticized as a "sweetheart deal" (Sottile & Moshtaghian, 2024).

This shows the tenuousness of the effectiveness of filming violence in order to achieve justice for the victims through the legal system. Because of the heightened political climate at the time, as well as the notoriety of the perpetrator, the video of violence against the vendor went viral nationwide, transcending the typical local scale of similar videos, and attracted attention and calls for legal punishment. However, the fervor of the public outrage was quickly diminished following his arrest due to the overall short temporal nature of the internet, with activists largely moving on to other issues, meaning that there was no longer an organized bloc keeping tabs on the proceedings. The nationwide attention that the video gained when analyzed alongside the temporary nature of the activism it engendered shows how this form of documentation is both "sticky" across time and flexible across space, which is key to the politics of it. It is able to surpass local geographies, drawing together vast coalitions of interest, while simultaneously often being constrained within particular viral moments. However, it is important to note that while the case itself might have only gone viral for a short time, it is still generative, contributing to an overall understanding of the conditions of vending, and the relationship between vulnerability, labor, and public space. Moreover, as Wade (2017) reminds us, "viral content is mutable; it can change forms as it reaches more people" (p.35). Therefore, through their

interactions with viral videos like this one, the public co-produces vending politics—not only are coalitions created around these viral politics, but the politics themselves are changed through interactions with viral media. Viewing the viral videos shapes the ways they think about vending, and therefore can impact how they engage with vending politics online.

Furthermore, it shows that despite the public outrage animated by the video, filming as a tactical strategy can only go so far when it is occurring within the legal and political system that constitutes racial capitalism in the United States. Beyond creating public outrage and action around viral videos, filming violence and harassment against vendors has been alleged to help keep them safer, either acting as a deterrent against potential violence, or holding perpetrators to account after the fact. However, as seen in the example above, the ability of viral videos to help obtain legal justice for victims is still limited by the socio-political conditions of the system within which they occur.

Additionally, while the ability to film violent or dangerous situations may be raising public awareness about the violence and harassment vendors face everyday, it is often not enough to actually stop or prevent it from occurring. This is mainly because, as some vendors have discussed, there is often not enough time for vendors who are being harassed to take out their phones and record the altercations. As one vendor details, these interactions are often so quick and disorienting, that by the time they have the wherewithal to take out their phones to record, the perpetrator has disappeared, and the harm has already been done. This seems to suggest that even with the increased public attention due to the videos, the true amount of violence and harassment vendors face on a day-to-day basis is still underappreciated.

Although there are sometimes logistical issues related to recording, it still plays an integral role in online vendor activism. Often, video recordings are intended to serve a dual

purpose, not only acting as a deterrent, but also serving as evidence of what actually occurred. It is often upheld as the only option available to not only defend vendors in the moment, but to protect them from false accusations or other future forms of violence. One influencer discusses this relationship when sharing a video of a man harassing a vendor on a neighborhood street—in the video, the onlooker filming interacts with the harasser, telling him to leave the vendor alone, and that he is vending legally on the street. However, when this doesn't seem to deter the man, the onlooker says “I just want to let you know, you're being recorded, alright,” which portrays the recording device as both a tool that can be utilized when in-person confrontations do not work, as well as a reminder that the man's actions will exist digitally beyond the current moment. The pro-vendor influencer who posted the video on his account agreed with this framing, arguing that

I am glad someone was there to record the incident and support the street vendor...I saw some people in the original video leaving comments saying ‘why didn't he do more?’ I personally think he did the right thing. Exposing someone, while at the same time not giving people ground to call law enforcement or to try to make themselves the victim. (senor\_barragan, personal communication, December 14, 2023)

This also shows the power of video recordings to combat false narratives and protect the vendor from having to interact with the police, which can often lead to them being criminalized, rather than the actual harasser. It also reveals an understanding by vendors and allies of the vulnerability of vendors, especially when it comes to public opinion and sentiment. Because of how they are often negatively framed within the public imagination, without video evidence, vendors are more likely to be perceived as at fault, or engaging in illegal or anti-social behaviors, while the harasser is more likely to be acquitted of any responsibility or wrongdoing.

The use of mobile recording devices by citizens is conceptualized as “sousveillance,” or “watching from below” within surveillance studies—the act resisting hegemonic surveillance through “surveilling back” (Mann et al. 2003; Mann & Ferenbock, 2013, p.19; Timan & Albrechtslund, 2018). Although originally used to describe the observation and recording of authorities and organizations like police, this term has since been expanded to include citizens watching and recording citizens (Timan & Albrechtslund, 2018). We can see the use of camera phones to record as a form of sousveillance, and representing what Mann has called “reflectionism” or the use of cameras as a mirror to ask “do you like what you see?” (Mann et al. 2003, pp. 333). Through this reflective exercise, society is able to “confront itself or see its own absurdity” (Mann, 1998, pp. 95). By posting videos of violence against vendors online, activists are not only protecting vendors from potential criticism or criminalization but also casting a mirror on the public and society, showing the ugly face of violence against vendors. This not only allows for public recognition of the harassment vendors face everyday, but also provides a space in which it can be critiqued and resisted, challenging hegemonic discourses around vending, and contributing to a larger pro-vendor political project.

However, it is important to note that the presence of cameras and other digital recording devices can also shape the behaviors of those being recorded (Timan & Albrechtslund, 2018). Sometimes, the act of filming can itself incite violent reactions from perpetrators, increasing the risk to the vendor. For example, during one altercation, the owner of a Long Beach brick-and-mortar taquería chain grabbed and smashed a taco stand employee’s phone because he was recording (Cabral, 2024). Additionally, there is also an understanding within the vendor and activist community that the presence of a recording device can itself affect the public’s behavior, leading to a questioning of the reliability and validity of videos as evidence of the reality of

interactions between vendors and the public. For example, one video uploaded on Instagram shows a 7-11 owner threatening to call police on vendors who he alleges are working on his property. Within the comments, some people are crediting the owner with not shouting at the vendor, or threatening her with violence, meaning that because he is being respectful, he does not deserve to be exposed on social media. However, others point to the presence of the camera as potentially impacting and shaping his reaction—is he being polite because he is being recorded? Moreover, they argue there is no way to know how the owner was behaving prior to being filmed—perhaps he was more forceful or violent when not on camera (enamoradoalex, personal communication, November, 7 2023). This shows an awareness of the ability of cameras to shape and condition behavior, especially in a charged online political environment that often implies the potential for exposure or “cancelling” by the public. It also points to differing opinions online about what is actually threatening or violent actions—many argue that his use of the police as a deterrent is in and of itself threatening due to the possibility of state violence that often accompanies law enforcement actions in the US. The interaction is also especially interesting because both the vendor and the owner are immigrants, which also potentially conditions their relationships with both the state and the public. On the one hand, the vendor faces increased danger from the police as agents of the state due to their immigrant status. However, as some commenters point out, the owner might also have to be more careful in his actions when being filmed due to his increased vulnerability as compared with a white or non-immigrant owner. These examples show the complexity of filming as a deterrent to, or evidence of, violence and harassment.

### 4.3.2 Doing Activism Within Commodified Digital Space

One important aspect of online activism is the politics of the platforms themselves. Vendor activists frequently post on platforms including Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Facebook. Although this project focused mainly on Instagram and TikTok, as that is where the largest and most active accounts are, most of the content is cross posted between these platforms, meaning that they all have similar overall content. This means that the access and use of digital platforms is integral to the activism—online vendor activists rely on social media platforms to build and maintain networks of support and solidarity for vendors. Following the work of Habermas (1991), we can conceptualize the social media vendor activism spaces as an example of “the public sphere,” or informal spaces of political life where people gather to enter into discourses about the activities of the state. As defined by Bennet and Entman, the public sphere is comprised of “any and all locations, physical or virtual, where ideas and feelings relevant to politics are transmitted or exchanged openly” (2001, p. 3). The public sphere “requires unlimited access to information, equal and protected participation, and the absence of institutional influence, particularly regarding the economy” (Kruse, Norris & Flinchum, 2017, p. 63).

While Habermas (1991) argued that the public sphere is nonexistent in modern life due to the overwhelming influence of financial corporate interests in mass media, the growth and expansion of the internet, including crucially social media, has prompted revitalized discussions about the potential for the creation and maintenance of a digital public sphere (Bennet & Dahlgren, 2005; Entman, 2001; Fuchs, 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2017; Papacharissi, 2010). This is because the nature of social media seems to provide both unlimited access to information and equal, protected participation—in an idealized form, it allows anyone

to freely participate in online discourse, distributing and collecting information that is not controlled or limited by outside political or economic influence. The potential for the internet to pave the way for a revitalized public sphere is particularly compelling due to its perceived independence from the financial interests of an increasingly corporate and monopolized mass media (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Because social media allows users to share information, challenge discourses and perspectives, and self-publish their views, it avoids the hegemonic tendencies of corporate mass media by providing “access, participation, reciprocity, and peer-to-peer rather than one to many communication” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 208-9).

However, numerous researchers have challenged the idea of seemingly free and equal social media platforms, unencumbered by the political economic conditions of traditional media, including scholars of critical technology and media studies (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Fuchs 2012; ; Galloway, 2004a; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer 2013). They argue that the internet, including social media websites, has not provided unlimited access to information, nor does it offer equal access and participation generally. Moreover, unlike early conceptions of the internet as a kind of decentralized, “wild west” communication form, it is increasingly captured and dominated by institutional and corporate interests, both public and private (Galloway, 2004a; Thatcher & Dalton, 2022). For example, as discussed earlier in the chapter, Meta now owns not only Facebook, but also other media and communication platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp. In addition to this monopolization, multinational technology companies have also become increasingly political in nature (or perhaps more accurately, have become more openly transparent about their politics, and more willing to explicitly advocate for and enact political action). This includes not only changes in political positioning within companies, but also the purchase of technology platforms and companies for explicitly political rationales. One example

of this is the recent sale of TikTok's US operations to an investment consortium that includes Republican megadonor, Trump ally, and strongly pro-Israel Larry Ellison, with many linking this sale to not only fears of Chinese data harvesting, but also to the use of TikTok to raise awareness and encourage action around left-wing political movements and causes, including the genocide in Gaza (Bery, 2025).

Moreover, the political and economic capture of online social media by right-wing, corporate interests has only exacerbated already-existing allegations of digital manipulation of online content by platform providers. There have long been allegations by activists, academics, and digital and human rights organizations that online discourses and politics are being censored and manipulated by platform providers. For example, Human Rights Watch released a study in 2023 detailing Meta's censorship of pro-Palestine content on Facebook and Instagram, claiming that between October and November 2023, they documented over 1,050 takedowns or suppression of content posted by Palestinians and pro-Palestine supporters. They identify various modes of digital suppression, including the removal of posts, the suspension or shadow-banning of accounts, and restrictions on activities such as liking, commenting, tagging, and sharing (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

As described by Human Rights Watch, there are various ways that platform providers manipulate and suppress online activity, especially in the case of online activism. These range in severity from removing posts, restricting access for users, to limiting the use of accounts all together. There have also been documented cases of accounts being deleted altogether—for example, in late 2025, Meta deleted dozens of Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp accounts belonging to abortion providers, queer groups, and reproductive rights organizations (Down, 2025).

In addition to suspending or deleting accounts, platform providers also pursue more clandestine methods of information suppression. These tactics are often shrouded in secrecy and can be difficult for activists and other users to identify and combat. This is especially true of what is referred to as “shadow banning,” which is when a platform restricts the visibility of an account without informing the user, often leading to severe decreases in traffic and views for their content. Moreover, in addition to the user not being informed of a shadow ban, it is often nearly impossible to uncover the use of shadow bans, even for software engineers (Zaman, 2024). Therefore, the clandestine nature of shadow banning often results in confusion and seemingly conspiratorial thinking on the part of affected users—they perceive that their content is getting less engagement than normal but are unable to ascertain or prove if its visibility is actually being manipulated. This obfuscation promotes mistrust not only of social media platforms, but of targeted users themselves, with claims of shadow banning commonly attributed to paranoia and conspiracy theories.

The forms of manipulation and suppression of social media content detailed above are not uncommon in online street vendor activism. For example, Alex Enamorado, formerly one of the most prominent street vendor activists, had his Instagram account suspended and subsequently deleted in November of 2023. One result of this was the censorship of his previous content which featured details of violence against vendors, resources to help vendors, and other important information. The ease with which his political content was suppressed reveals the danger of the ephemeral nature of online content, especially content which is politically contentious or radical. Although social media allows for the quick and easy dissemination of information, and the creation of political communities around that content, it also makes the suppression of that activism easier than ever before.

The suspension of Enamorado's account also affected the large online community he had amassed at the time, which included over 270,000 followers. Although Enamorado was able to create a backup account, this large community of followers was severely diminished, limiting his online presence and weakening the strong online community he had invested considerable time and effort in building. Enamorado and other street vendor activists have also posted about how they suspected that they were being shadow banned at various points, and that their content was being limited or erased from the timelines of their followers. However, as discussed above, this is largely impossible to prove. Nevertheless, the validity of these claims aside, the fact that activists believe that they are victims of shadow bans is equally important to understand the overall conditions of online social media activism, especially radical politics. These activists are operating with the consciousness that their words and actions are being monitored and potentially manipulated by not online platform providers, but also frequently the state, and private actors including corporations. It also shows that they are intimately aware of the fact that their work could be disrupted or impeded at any moment, meaning that the relationship between the work they are doing online and off is crucially important. This relationship will be discussed later in the chapter.

In addition to efforts to limit or eliminate accounts, platform providers also often attempt to manipulate and control the conversations that occur around content—for example, allegedly contentious or inappropriate comments are often “hidden,” meaning that they are less accessible to audiences. This process differs based on the platform, but, especially when applied to politically relevant content, the result is often the suppression of more radical political views, and thus the manipulation of online conversations towards specific hegemonic opinions (Gorwa, Binns, & Katzenbach, 2020). For example, on a video discussing the arrests of Alex Enamorado

and the Justice 8, there are multiple hidden comments, with the first one reading “Wow Instagram is hiding all comments that say free them” to which people respond “Your comment is hidden” and “META compliant with white supremacy.” This shows an understanding by the public (or at least members of the public who interact with online activist content) that not only are contentious comments regularly hidden, but also there exists a strong relationship between the corporations who own the platforms and political repression. They know that conversations are being manipulated online, but have no real recourse aside from “calling it out.” Also hidden within the comments is a template email that people can use to email the DA to protest the arrests, with a responder writing “meta hid it” (senor\_barragan, personal communication, December 14, 2023). As the responder identifies, it is significant that the one comment that provides an avenue for positive political action is hidden. However, it is important to note that many of the comments that are not hidden are also politically radical and contentious, including comments reading “ACAB,” calling for protests, and linking the arrests with white supremacy and racism. This shows that the process of determining what content is visible and what content is not is obscured and does not seem to follow any real rationale. It may be that there is a form of algorithmic suppression occurring where certain words or phrases are flagged— “free them” may be one example, as the commenter above observes. However, although it is unclear how META is filtering its comments, the fact that commenters are aware of this manipulation of the conversation is in itself significant.

Another increasingly common method of influencing and controlling online conversations is the use of inauthentic accounts. This includes automated “bot” accounts, which can be cheaply purchased from companies who sell false social media engagement—one study from 2025 estimates that automated bots account for over half of all online traffic (Cuthbertson,

2025). Bot manipulation has been identified as influencing numerous political events globally, including the so-called “MacronLeaks” during the 2017 French election (Ferrara, 2017), Brexit (Bastos & Mercea, 2017), and the 2016 US Presidential election (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016). In addition to automated bots, social media conversations can be manipulated by actual users, including prominent online “influencers,” who are paid for promoting specific content and views. For example, an investigation in 2025 found that Chorus, a non-profit associated with the Democratic Party in the US, had been secretly paying online political influencers up to \$8000 a month to promote and support the Democrats on social media (Lorenz, 2025).

Understanding the potential for the creation and use of artificial accounts and thus discourse is important for street vendor online activism because of the often-organized opposition to the work being done by activists online. Under many posts featuring violence against vendors, and advocating for support for them, there are numerous accounts that post comments questioning the validity of the content, disparaging or attacking vendors and their work, and calling for people to be in opposition to the posts and posters who support vendors. Many of these comments reflect larger narratives and stereotypes of vendors as undesirable, unclean, and foreign. They also frequently attack the activists themselves, claiming that they are creating content not to support vendors, but rather as a form of self-promotion in an attempt to gain notoriety and fame. This is especially true of the more prominent accounts—for example, Alex Enamorado, previously the most popular online vendor activist in Southern California, had multiple accounts that were dedicated to critiquing both his actions and him directly. These anonymous accounts were joined in attacking Enamorado by people who he had criticized or accused of being anti-vendor, forming larger oppositional communities.

While these accounts have not been proven to be fake, there are many accusations of bots and paid accounts manipulating comments sections under pro-vendor content. These claims are generally unsubstantiated, due to the difficulty of proving false social media activity. However, similar to hidden comments, despite, or perhaps because of, this uncertainty, many activists and supporters seem to take for granted that conversations around street vendor content are being manipulated. The understanding that online discourse, especially political discourse, is constantly being manipulated by outside forces, including the platforms themselves, seems to go without saying for many activists and users. Complicating this further is the presence of real anti-vendor accounts, which create and post videos disparaging vendors and activists. These accounts interact with accounts accused of being bots, making ascertaining fake accounts even more difficult. Moreover, as discussed above, investigations have proven that influencers and other political content creators online are frequently paid for their content, making it very difficult to determine the authenticity of online discourse around vendors. This can be seen as part of a broader epistemological crisis of “truth” that extends far beyond online vendor activism spaces. Discussions of “fake news” and “psyops” show how online populations are increasingly skeptical about who is providing them with information, how it is being provided, and for what purpose. As a result, this casts doubt on all actions and statements made within the digital public sphere, meaning that everything online is not only simultaneously true and untrue, but also that the validity of online information and discourse is secondary to the discourse surrounding it.

The manipulation and suppression of social media content and accounts expose the precarious nature of online activism more generally, including crucially the insecurity of doing radical politics on platforms owned and operated by corporations. This insecurity underscores the importance of the relationship between on and offline politics. While some of the vendor

activists operated solely online, many others moved between digital and real-world activism, with the two forms forming a co-constitutive relationship. For example, Enamorado would collect and disseminate content showing violence against, or harassment of, vendors through social media, drawing attention to, and creating coalitions around, these events. He would also use digital platforms like GoFundMe to solicit donations on social media for victimized vendors. Following this consciousness raising, he would then often call for political action offline, including protests of the people and institutions responsible for the violence and harassment, as well as community events designed to provide monetary and public support for victimized vendors. He also frequently confronted perpetrators in person, often filming the encounters and posting them online.

Activists show an understanding of the importance of the relationship between on and offline activism, especially in relation to the precarity of political activism on social media. For example, when his account was suspended, Enamorado posted “We depend too much on the electrical grid but we have BUILT community support in the streets so we’re not worried” (11/13/23). Not only does this illustrate the importance of having an offline base of support due to the commodified nature of privately-owned platforms, it also shows overall the crucial role that real-world organizing plays within vending activism as a whole. Although the online content attracts the majority of public attention and virality, it is the offline work that not only supports this work but ensures that the movement as a whole is resistant to attempts to silence or undermine it.

### 4.3.3 “Clickbait for Cash:” The Digital Activism of the Justice 8

Thinking through the relationship between online and in-person activism brings us back to the criminal case against Alex Enamorado and the Justice 8 described at the beginning of the chapter. In this case, the state explicitly used claims of online manipulation to persecute the street vendor activists. They asserted that the activists posted manipulated videos and content to social media in order to not only falsely accuse others of crimes and anti-social behavior, but also to solicit financial gains under false pretenses—so-called “clickbait for cash.” However, in spite of this strong language from police following the arrests, these claims are dubious because many of the videos posted by the group were “live,” meaning there was necessarily no editing or video manipulation. This is reminiscent of the first wave of body cams as a “solution” to police violence, and shows how digital documentation doesn’t necessarily generate clear and indisputable evidence, but instead produces new ways of challenging or undermining the evidence, especially when that evidence is used against the state (Lartey, 2023). Moreover, the state eventually dropped these claims, building their case instead around three “real-world” incidents. The fact that these sensationalist portrayals of the dangerous use of social media were only used prior to the trials shows the power of these purposefully opaque technologies in generating public outrage—the police were able to use the public’s lack of understanding of the digital to create a narrative around the activists that was ultimately not even included in their eventual case. The state instead charged the activists with conspiracy, assault, and false imprisonment stemming from three interactions activists had with people they claim assaulted or harassed vendors. They alleged that on September 3, the activists assaulted a security guard in front of a grocery store, following an incident earlier in the day where they proceeded to “intimidate and humiliate” a man outside his home in Pomona. They also claim that on

September 23<sup>rd</sup>, the activists harassed and assaulted a man outside a carwash in Victorville, preventing him from leaving the scene in his car (Victoria, 2024). All of these interactions were filmed by the activists and then posted and re-posted on their social media accounts.

Viewing the videos shows activists verbally accosting the alleged victims, accusing them of crimes against street vendors. You do not see any evidence of physical assault in the videos, but it is clear that there was an intense confrontation between the activists and the alleged victims. The videos of the incidents were cited as evidence of the crimes. This shows the dangers of documenting and disseminating protest actions, especially more radical or militant ones. Although the videos served to raise consciousness and create coalitions around the issue of violence against vendors, they also allowed the state to collect evidence of the alleged offenses. Anti-hegemonic political action has always been dangerous and subject to state repression in the United States—the histories of communism, Black radicalism and other left-wing movements in the US are ones fraught with state violence, both explicit and covert. However, the proliferation of digital devices, and the subsequent use of them for documenting political action, have made these efforts easier than ever. Content created and disseminated by activists and allies (including at protests and political rallies) is paired with digital surveillance, GPS, and other digital tools to surveil, track, and persecute activists. For example, during the recent clashes between federal immigration agents and activists in Minneapolis and LA, there have been many claims that ICE and other immigration officials are using AI-enabled social media and location tracking software to monitor where people have been, as well as identifying other people who were in the same area, to create sophisticated maps of connections between activists. These technologies are explicitly advertised and marketed for use during large public protests (Hubbard, 2026).

This case therefore shows that the digital tools used by vulnerable or oppressed peoples to resist and document violence and abuse can also be hijacked by their oppressors and used against them. Theories of sousveillance (Mann, 2013) conceptualize digital recording devices as a tool for surveilling back, resisting hegemonic regimes of surveillance related to criminalization through upending the very tools used by the state. However, this case shows how that process can be further inverted, with the state using videos intended to protect vulnerable people to instead continue to enact violence against them. This means that activists must be very careful with what they share online, and their digital footprint overall. This fear of the appropriation of the digital resources used by activists is increasingly present in activist spaces, including protests.

Moreover, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, although digital media and activism were central to the initial accusations made against the Justice 8 by the state, ultimately the charges were largely unrelated to digital activism. While all the defendants aside from Enamorado pleaded out, meaning that it is unknown how exactly the state planned to build their case, it is probable that digital media was intended to serve as evidence in the case. The Justice 8 were charged with a number of crimes related to three confrontations between the activists and members of the public accused of violence against vendors, including assault, false imprisonment, and conspiracy to commit a crime. Because of the nature of their work as online activists, all of these encounters were filmed and disseminated on various social media accounts. During pretrial hearings for Enamorado, prosecutors played a video of him livestreaming outside of the Pomona Police Department in which he criticized the department for not arresting a security guard accused of assaulting a vendor, and vowed “We’ll be holding him accountable” (Solis, 2024). Enamorado and other members of the Justice 8 later got into confrontations with

the guard, including when he approached them as they were protesting outside of the grocery store where he worked. Following this confrontation, the activists allegedly assaulted the guard inside of the store, including using pepper spray on him. In building the case against him, police used the earlier video as evidence of conspiracy to commit a crime.

Viewing the police press release and subsequent information released by law enforcement, there is a sense that the police do not fully understand the digital tools and mechanisms they claim to have built their case on. In addition to the inability to edit live video, the police claim that the activists used “sophisticated means to locating their victims,” including identifying the residence of one of the victims using “online data” (Villafana, 2024). Because no other details were provided, it is unclear what the police mean by this statement. However, Enamorado’s attorney has refuted these claims, explaining that the evidence has shown that the alleged victim lived down the street from the police station, and the house was easily pointed out by someone at the protest, meaning that the claims of using online locational methods are false. Although untrue, these claims seem to point to a simultaneous lack of understanding on the part of the state, and the exploitation of the general public ignorance around digital technologies to imply the defendants were utilizing sophisticated and dangerous forms of technology. These claims served to not only create public fear and mistrust of the activists, but also to materially affect their prosecution—one reason cited by the prosecution for denying the defendants bail was that they could easily digitally locate their alleged victims.

Moreover, this is not the only justification for bail denial used by the state—the district attorney also claimed that the state would have no way of monitoring the activists’ social media usage if they were released, suggesting that their use of social media presented a threat to the public. In contrast with this alleged public danger, Enamorado’s attorney cited the case of

Christopher Zamora, an accused child molester, who was granted bail on the same day that Wendy Lujain, one of the defendants, was denied it. Zamora used this seeming contradiction to suggest that the state views the online activism of the Justice 8 as more threatening and dangerous than the alleged sexual assault of a child, likely because not only did the activists target public figures like Mayor Aquanetta Warren, but also because their actions do not fit within the liberal forms of protest and activism agreeable to the state.

There is therefore an opaqueness and mysticism around digital technologies that make them useful for the state. The enigmatic nature of the digital for much of the public allows it to be used as an abstracted boogeyman, an incomprehensible and dangerous force through which unknown horrors can potentially arise. By framing the online activism of Enamorado and the Justice 8 as “ritualized harassment to gain notoriety,” as well as implying that they could use locational data to continue their harassment, the state is insinuating that activists are able to enact violence in ways that the general public cannot even imagine (Solis, 2024). The digital is given seemingly supernatural powers that heighten the fear of online activism and produce negative perceptions of the activists. Relatively mundane altercations between the activists and their adversaries are thus magnified and sensationalized in ways that set them apart from similar crimes. Moreover, by exaggerating the actions of the Justice 8, the state is marginalizing the extreme violence that is enacted upon vendors everyday.

It is important to note that less than a week prior to his arrest, Enamorado had filed a lawsuit against the city of Fontana, claiming the city had violated the civil rights of vendors. He argued that not only was their vendor ordinance unlawful because it allowed for unlicensed vendors to be arrested, but they were also using excessive force on vendors when enforcing the ordinance (enamoradobackup, 2023c). This lawsuit gained a lot of attention in both online and

traditional media, with multiple local news channels reporting on it. It was also filed after months of conflict between city officials and enforcement agents in Fontana, and vendors and their allies, during which pro-vendor voices had packed city council meetings, protested outside of elected officials homes, and confronted city officials directly. These actions had drawn considerable negative attention to Fontana, and to the Inland Empire in general. Overall, there was a sense that, following the successes of the movement in LA, the Inland Empire was the next frontier where the battle over vending would be fought. However, this quickly changed following the arrest of the Justice 8 and the sensationalized narratives crafted around their activism. The story quickly became not about the illegal suppression of vendor's rights in cities like Fontana, San Bernardino, and Pomona, but instead about the violent digital activist gang run by Enamorado. Although there are still many organizers and activists within Fontana and the Inland Empire fighting for the rights of vendors, the unlawful ordinance in Fontana that allows for the harassment and criminalization of vendors still exists to this day, although Public Council has filed a lawsuit to overturn it.

As for the Justice 8, the state's campaign of persecution was largely successful. After months of being held without bail, six of the eight activists pleaded guilty to a single charge of assault and were shortly released from prison. Another activist had his charges successfully dropped. While the defendants have claimed that there are no restrictions on their ability to protest as part of their plea deals, the energy and momentum of the pre-arrest movement has not been revitalized. This is most likely due to not only the trauma many of the defendants claim to have experienced as a result of their ordeal in the US carceral system, but also because Enamorado remains in jail. He has rejected any offers of plea deals due to his immigration status.

There has been little news from Enamorado since mid-2025. He remains in jail awaiting trial, and even the public outrage both online and off has largely died down. However, although online opposition has waned, many street vendors still support and maintain the memory of his work on their behalf, with many discussing how they feel less supported and more unsafe because he is no longer able to work on their behalf. For these vendors, he was not only a social media activist, but also a crucial ally and champion of their rights and safety on the streets. As one vendor states “Don’t believe the lies.... Not everything he did was posted online. We would have meetings with vendors once a month to go over everything, and there’s a lot that he did offline that people didn’t see. He was always there for us no matter the time or day he always showed up” (Villafana, 2024).

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the various ways that vendors and their allies interact with and use digital technologies, including how vendors utilize technology in their everyday vending practices, and how activists and organizers create and operationalize digital advocacy networks to promote and support pro-vendor policies and politics.. To begin, I responded to a need for work digital technologies and vending, and more specifically vending in the global North, to show how the digital is increasingly integral to the business of vending, including the rise and increasing dominance of digital payment systems, the consolidation of permitting and administrative tasks onto the city’s online platforms, and the use of digital marketing and advertising to not only promote and grow their businesses, but also to combat negative stereotypes and articulate their place in the city. This includes practices of digital placemaking,

(Halegoua and Polson, 2021) through which vendors and allies use spatial media to explicitly articulate their place in cities.

I additionally analyzed how processes of differentiation and exclusion are manifested through all these activities, creating uneven vending conditions. However, I also looked at how digital technologies have been used to combat these negative processes, and how they have become integral to vendor organizing and activism. For organizers, the digital is a crucial tool that allows them to more easily communicate with vendors and form strong coalitions around vending, while also ensuring that movement continues to be centered on vendors, and that their voices and perspectives are leading and guiding the direction and goals of the movement. I also examined how activists use online social media platforms to raise awareness of issues facing vendors in LA, as well as attempt to hold people who enact violence against vendors accountable. This includes crucially the use of personal recording devices like cell phones for sousveillance or surveilling back, reflecting the violence and harassment vendors face back to the world which created the conditions under which they occur. However, as examined in the case of the Justice 8, doing political activism on commodified platforms, especially radical politics, is an insecure and often dangerous endeavor. Because the internet is largely captured by private mega-corporations, the nature of online politics can be tenuous, as seen by the suspension of Enamorado's Instagram account, as well as other oppressive digital practices like shadow-banning and online manipulation by platforms. Moreover, the rise of bots and other kinds of artificial digital tools makes it increasingly difficult to ascertain the legitimacy of online discourses and content. This danger of suppression, manipulation, and obfuscation online, as well as the inherent issues with using digital tools and technologies developed under racial capitalist logics, has only increased the importance of the interconnected relationship between on

and offline political action for not only activists, but for organizers and vendors as well. Overall, this chapter included not only a discussion of the limitations and challenges inherent within the use of technologies developed under, and designed to ultimately support, racial capitalism, but also how vendors and supporters work against these systems of exclusion and control to imagine and work towards more just futures.

## **Chapter 5. Vending in the Neoliberal City: Socialities and Spatialities of Control**

This chapter will examine the forms of urban governance that produce and maintain the conditions of vending in Los Angeles. This includes the discursive and material practices designed to exclude vendors from both the city as it is, and as it is imagined by planners, city officials, and others engaged in forms of urbanism designed to attract global finance. Under these neoliberal paradigms, vendors are positioned as foreign, undesirable, dangerous, and, on the whole, antithetical to overall the imaginary of the city, not only because they are seen as economically marginal, but also because they reveal the inequalities and injustices inherent to not only neoliberal urban conditions, but global racial capitalism more generally. Through their physical position on sidewalks and streets, vendors make visible the intersecting conditions of labor, migration, and carcerality that characterize urban life under racial capitalism. This confrontation with the results of the workings of racial capitalism disrupt the alleged emancipatory nature of global capital, showing the real-world repercussions of an inherently exploitative system built and reliant on differentiation between various groups. Therefore, in order to obscure the fundamental inequality of contemporary urban life, and promote idealized neoliberal urban futures, cities often pursue and enact exclusionary and punitive policies and practices. This chapter will focus on the specific socialities and spatialities of control that facilitate these liberal forms of inclusion and differentiation, including administrative and legal practices. It will also examine how these practices occur within different levels of governance at various scales, showing how inclusion and exclusion are flexible and ever changing based on the needs of capital.

## 5.1 “You’re the Criminal:” Perceptions of Vendors in the Neoliberal City

As discussed throughout this research, the framing of street vendors within cities is overwhelmingly as foreign or antithetical to the overall well-being of the city, and thus undesirable. This conception of vendors as diametrically opposed to the city as imagined by officials, planners, and urban elites is dominant both temporally and spatially—vendors have been perceived this way historically and contemporarily, and in places across both the global South and North. Within these frameworks, vendors are seen as disruptive to the “orderly” public spaces which they inhabit, representing a rupture with the “acceptable” formal economy of the city. Rather than seeing vendors as representing another facet of the urban economic environment, cities perceive vendors as personifying the failures and externalities of life under urban capitalism—the conditions of urban workers unable to access formal employment, the growth of uncontrollable urban public spaces, and, at a larger scale, the exclusion of vast swaths of urban people from deeply unequal and divided cities. As a result, vendors are consistently framed as alien, undesirable, and thus something to be controlled or eliminated. These frameworks have material effects on the lives of vendors—not only do these perceptions influence the relationship between city governments and vendors, but they also disseminate into the city more generally, conditioning the overall public perception of vending.

Throughout the interviews and online data collection, the theme of perceptions towards vendors was prominent—nearly every vendor and advocate interviewed specifically named this as a major issue facing vendors in LA, as well as a priority for the future of vendor organizing. Moreover, there is clear evidence of the relationship between negative framings of vendors and their allies and larger urban political and economic projects. For example, at the time of the fieldwork, the city of Fontana was the site of some of the most contentious and repressive

vending ordinances in Southern California. In response, vendors and allies attended city council meetings, protested in the streets and outside of the mayor's home, and mounted a large and widespread on and offline campaign against the illegal policies. In response to this pushback, Mayor Warren and her allies attacked vendors and activists in the media, with Warren explicitly framing protestors as foreign, telling a local news agency that "Those people don't live here, because if they lived here, they would not have behaved in that manner" (p0nch0\_el\_chic0, personal communication, November 6, 2023). However, video from the city council meeting prior to the protest shows multiple vendors and advocates proclaiming how long they have lived in the city, and describing their strong ties with the community, including speakers from the South Fontana Concerned Citizen's Coalition

Moreover, speakers drew clear connections between entrepreneurial political and economic policies pursued by the city, the persecution of vendors, and decreasing safety in the city, tying the vending ordinances with the rise of warehouses in the area. Once the center of California's "Orange Empire," the Inland Empire is now dominated by warehouses for multinational corporations like Amazon. More than four thousand warehouses and distribution centers now occupy over one billion square feet of land in the Inland Empire, with the largest employer Amazon representing one in eight jobs in the area. In addition to Amazon, Fontana houses distribution centers for Coca-Cola, Target, and Fedex, among others. Since 2010, Fontana has constructed more than 70 new warehouses, which cover nearly one thousand acres in the city (Newton, 2024). This rise of warehouses has had severe negative effects on the area, not only contributing to air pollution in one of the most polluted counties in the country, but also representing what one San Bernardino city council member has called a "pipeline to poverty" due to the fact that only 4 in 10 warehouse jobs pay workers a living wage (Gudis, 2022). The

geography of warehouses in the Inland Empire is also spatially uneven—the majority of warehouses are located in communities of color (Singh, 2021). This is especially noteworthy because of a long history of racism and racialized violence within Fontana, and the Inland Empire as a whole (Speri & Harmon, 2024). This domination of warehouses, and the negative effects it has on the local communities, including adverse health issues like asthma and heart problems, has been theorized as a form of “slow violence,” unfolding gradually and affecting not only current residents, but generations to come (Gudis, 2022). In pursuing policies designed centered on the further growth of warehouses and distribution centers, cities like Fontana are ignoring the adverse effects forced on its residents in favor of urban growth and capital accumulation.

Moreover, these actions are taken in conjunction with redevelopment plans for the city, including the redevelopment of the downtown area, which is aimed not at improving the lives of current residents of Fontana, but at “attracting visitors throughout the region” by constructing “a lively mixed-use district and cultural hub that truly embodies the notion of live, work and play – all within a 30-minute drive for 1.7 million Southern Californians” (Fontana, n.d.). The disparities between the neoliberal imaginary of Fontana, and the reality of the city, is explained by Alfonso Gonzalez Toribio, an associate professor of ethnic studies at UC Riverside, who argues that “There is this class dynamic that they’re trying to sell the Inland Empire as sort of the middle-class suburban alternative to living in Orange County. And in doing that, they’re trying to create the image of these pristine uniform suburban spaces that don’t have room for street vending” (Vega, 2024).

Speakers at the Fontana city council meeting contrasted this entrepreneurial, pro-warehouse, urban and regional planning with the repressive vending ordinances, arguing that

“It’s the influx of warehouses, of all of the warehouses that you guys have approved, that has made this city dangerous, not the street vendors” (p0nch0\_el\_chic0, personal communication, November 6, 2023). Another commenter said

I’ve been a resident of Fontana since I was 5 years old, so a full 20 years now...for years I have seen how the community has changed, how our city has changed, how more and more warehouses have been added. Recently I went on a hike by the nature center...and I got to see up on the hill, my community, it's all warehouses now. You’re using your time and energy for this, but now you’re also using our money to brutalize street vendors... I can't say im disappointed, because to be disappointed I would have to have faith in you, and to be honest, I haven't had faith [sic] in a long time. (p0nch0\_el\_chic0, personal communication, November 6, 2023)

In these remarks, we can see a clear connection being made between the priority of the city to attract companies like Amazon and build warehouses, and the violence that is being enacted against vendors. Other commenters also drew attention to the uneven ways in which the city distributes its resources, with one resident saying

I’m a resident from Fontana for over 30 years, and I don’t believe its right what you’re doing Aquanetta. Street vendors are not criminals. For you to try to make them seem like they are criminals, that they are coming from LA to become criminals here, you’re the criminal. You see all of our streets, they’re all messed up. Sierra [Ave] has been trying to be fixed for over two years now, and it hasn’t been fixed. We’ve got Arrow [Blvd}, it’s all dark...they’re talking about people getting ran over but you don’t have lights on those streets, but you wanna criminalize all the street vendors. You’re wrong for that. (p0nch0\_el\_chic0, personal communication, November 6, 2023)

In contrast to this lack of attention to the needs of Fontana residents, other commenters discussed other forms of entrepreneurial urban politics pursued by the city, including residential development and the redevelopment of the downtown, which includes a performance space, residential buildings, as well as retail and restaurant space (including a ghost-kitchen complex, one of the emerging spaces representing the rise of the gig economy into food preparation and

sales) (Katz, 2024). Throughout many comments, there is a theme that the current development plans and strategies of the city are not reflective of the needs of the community and instead represents neoliberal urban ideology that is designed to attract middle class, white-collar workers. Moreover, there is an explicit comparison drawn between the framing of street vendors within the city, and of developers, with one resident commenting about vendors

You want to talk about them coming from the outside cities? What about all your developer homies that come from [sic], Newport, Beverly Hills? What about all that? Let's talk about how they come in here and make it dangerous for us. You don't understand that food helps to feed the community. (p0nch0\_el\_chic0, personal communication, November 6, 2023)

Throughout the meeting, the comments by the resident pushed back on the framing of vendors as alien or foreign criminal elements to the city, explicitly tying them with the community, and moreover arguing that they represent the true face of Fontana. Moreover, we can see this framing as a conflict between two visions of the future of Fontana, one which is dominated by the slow violence of exploitative and harmful warehouses, whose economic production supports the neoliberal redevelopment of the city for potential future residents, and another which supports and protects the current residents of the city, as represented in this case by street vendors.

## **5.2 Street Vending and Immigration: The Experience of Migrant Vendors in the City**

By characterizing vendors as alien to the cities in which they work, urban officials are able to make clear distinctions between the types of people and activities they claim are welcome in cities, and those that are not. This also implies a kind of unnatural or aberrant urban life that is incompatible with the lives of “normal” urban people, and thus necessarily must be controlled and eliminated if possible. This framing of vendors as foreign is bolstered by the fact that many

vendors globally, but especially in the West, are migrants. Street vending is a popular profession for many immigrant urban communities not only because they are excluded from formal work in cities, but also because they have strong personal and cultural ties to vending. Street vending is a common form of informal labor in many global South countries, including those which represent the largest share of migrants in the US. While it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of vendors globally due to a lack of reliable data, studies from individual cities in countries in South and Central America, Africa, and Asia have shown the large vendor populations which represent prominent shares of the total urban employment. For example, a 2023 study in Mexico found over 1.5 million people were employed as street vendors, 3% of the total national labor force (Ramírez Reynoso & Vanek, 2024). This familiarity with vending in their country of origin often leads immigrants to continue to vend once they migrate to the US.

### **5.2.1 From the Pueblo to Hollywood Boulevard: Street Vending and Latino Culture in LA**

This relationship between culture and vending was also reflected in the fieldwork from LA. One vendor discussed how her mother and sisters were vendors in their pueblo in Mexico, and she herself began vending at eight years old before she immigrated to the US. For her family in Mexico, vending was a crucial economic activity which supported their livelihoods. Once she migrated to the US, she was unable to find employment in the formal economy, and lacking other economic options, she returned to vending as it was a familiar and reliable way to support her family. This relationship between street vending in LA and immigrant culture, especially Latin American culture, is prominent throughout the social media research as well— often posts about street vending include hashtags such as #chicano and # Raza (\_raidertommy\_, 2023). Moreover, scholars working in LA and similar global North cities (Davis, 2001; Kettles, 2004; Muñoz, 2008) have discussed this relationship between culture and street vending, including the ensuing

transformations of urban space through cultural interactions mediated by vending. For example, Lorena Muñoz (2008) has analyzed how vendors produce what she calls new “urban cultural landscapes” through their invocation of place memories of their cultures of origin. Additionally, for many scholars (Chase, Crawford, & Kaliski, 1999; Davis, 2001), this process is one of revitalization of urban space and a transformation of urban life more generally—for example, Davis (2001) has discussed the use of public space by Latino immigrants, including vendors, as “transforming dead urban spaces into convivial social places” (p. 61). Many of these scholars have also shown how this cultural intersection and transformation is an often contentious process, with many viewing vendors and their communities with suspicion and hostility. These views are often reflective of deeper issues of culture and identity, seeing vending as signifying “the rise of another culture that threatens the status of their own” (Kettles, 2004, p. 41).

Efforts to advocate for the recognition of an explicitly Latino culture of vending as integral to the city of LA are prevalent throughout the evidence. Within online activism spaces, many vendors and advocates unambiguously portray the interconnectedness of Latino culture and experience and vending, including the use of various hashtags like #raza #chicano and #supportchicanobusinesses to link posts about vending with larger online Latino communities. Many posts are also in Spanish and thus explicitly speaking to Latino online communities. This can again be seen as a form of digital placemaking, one which is articulating the interconnectedness between Latino culture, street vending, and the city of LA.

There are also efforts to foster and cultivate positive depictions and associations of Latino culture and life in relation to vending. For example, CPC helped organize a concert with popular Mexican rock band Maná to raise money and awareness for street vendors in Boyle Heights, which they advertised extensively online through social media. Other popular Latino artists,

celebrities, and corporations are also frequently involved in advocating for vendors—for example, a well-known influencer “Juixxe,” real-name Jesús Morales, who became popular for surprising Latino street vendors and day laborers with large amounts of money and trips to places such as Disneyland, partnered with actor Mario Lopez to film a Youtube video donating \$1000 to a vendor (Morales, 2021). While Maná, and to a lesser extent the collaboration with Mario Lopez, are largely designed for Latino audiences, the close relationship between vending and Latino culture can also be seen in more “mainstream” media and content. For example, in addition to filming the video with Lopez, Juixxe has also appeared on the Kelly Clarkson daytime television show to advocate and raise money for vendors (Morales, 2023). More recently, during his 2026 Superbowl halftime show, Bad Bunny showcased numerous symbols and depictions of Latino culture, including a taco cart from beloved Highland Park taqueria “Villa’s Tacos” and vendors selling *coco frío* and *piraguas*. These depictions can also all be seen as forms of explicitly Latino digital placemaking—not only claiming a place for vendors in the city, but more broadly, asserting Latino culture and identity as intrinsically linked with vending in the US.

### **5.2.2 “LA Looks Like the Third World With a Bunch of Street Vendors:” Racialized Anti-Vendor Urban Politics**

However, as discussed above, this cultural placemaking can be contentious, especially to white elites in the city. Moreover, this concern with the cultural changes represented and facilitated by vending are often explicitly framed within larger global conditions of difference and implied inequality—it is not only that there is a cultural transformation of urban public space, but that this change is expressly non-Western. Street vendors and their cultural practices represent a so-called “third-world imaginary” which clashes with the “first-world expectations”

of many urban elites (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009, p. 153). For example, one TikTok video shows a view of LA from hills, with text on the video reading “This was a pretty view but LA looks like the third world with a bunch of street vendors,” and the description “So tired of American cities looking like Latin America” (lindacatalinaaa, 2026). In this video, and many like it, American cities are characterized as becoming more like cities in the global South. Frequently these videos show allegedly disorderly urban conditions, such as unhoused people, and are particularly ironic because they present an issue that is directly related to racial capitalism, a structure that is integral to contemporary American life. The TikTok described above not only falsely equates urban issues in the US with the global South, but also directly attributes this to street vendors. Therefore, not only are street vendors representative of non-Western ways of life, but they are again characterized as foreign invaders to the desired city, representing an undesirable cultural transformation of urban life. Moreover, for many of these critics, the framing of vendors as “alien” to the city is predicated not only on their status as informal workers, but also on their literal “foreignness” to the hegemonic culture of the US—their nationality is thus a defining feature of their differentiation.

Within the US, the mechanism through which nationality is legally organized and controlled is citizenship. Citizenship is not a neutral construction, but instead it functions as a broadly acceptable device for executing the exclusions that are normalized through the discursive and cultural construction of vendors’ identities as outsiders. That outsidership is multidimensional, but exclusion or removal can be made to seem justified when operationalized under a framework of citizenship. Because many vendors are immigrants, much of their differentiation is structured through the mechanism of citizenship, which formalizes and codifies their relationship with the state.

Moreover, the marginalization faced by many Latino vendors is not only related to their citizenship status. It also often manifests in racialized ways. This understanding of the harassment of Latino vendors as racialized is also important--many posts detailing violence or harassment against vendors explicitly characterize it in this way. For example, a security guard who was involved in an altercation with a vendor on the UC Irvine campus was described as engaging in “racist and degrading treatment” that “sends a loud message to Latino/a/x students, immigrants, BIPOC, and the working class” (senor\_barragan, personal communication, November 6, 2023). Similarly, a video posted on Instagram shows a clip from a podcast appearance of a female vendor who was hit by a car driven by a man who is explicitly called a “white supremacist” in text overlaying the video (Foo Community Podcast, personal communication, November 2, 2023). Another scandal which received a lot of online attention within the street vendor activism community occurred at Westcliff University (a private university in Irvine) when the official Instagram account for the school’s softball team posted a video of a member of the team dressed up as a paleta vendor chased by another player dressed up as an ICE agent. This video was quickly decried as racist within the online vendor community, with many creators discussing the complex relationship between ethnicity, citizenship, and vending, and calling for accountability from the school (senor\_barragan, personal communication, November 6, 2023). This video not only went viral within online street vendor communities but drew attention from leftist and Latino political accounts more generally, which is not uncommon for videos showing the violence and harassment faced by vendors.

As discussed above, vendors have historically been characterized as undesirable in cities across the globe. They are often portrayed as unclean, foreign, antisocial criminals who represent the potential disorder and chaos of urban streets that city officials and other elites must

necessarily work to control. As with everything, the specific dynamics at play are time and place specific—for example, in LA attempts to destroy vending in the mid to late nineteenth century can be linked with the growing national Sinophobia and Chinese exclusionist movement (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009). Similarly, in contemporary LA, much of the popular opinion on vendors and vending cannot be extricated from more general views on immigration and immigrants—the discursive and material politics of vending in LA are shaped by racialized narratives around immigrants, labor, and the economy. While these politics affect all immigrants and non-White Angelenos in some way, the public nature of vending means that vendors are often hyper-exposed to these politics because their livelihood practices require their presence and visibility in public space. These racialized, anti-immigrant politics deepen existing anti-vendor attitudes in cities, framing vendors as not merely metaphorically foreign, but literally foreign as well—they represent the incursion of the chaotic and disorderly “third world” into US cities.

### **5.3 Is an Inclusive Economy Possible Under Racial Capitalism? Tensions Within Urban Vending Politics**

These contestations around public space are particularly an issue for many cities including LA because they represent a larger conflict around the production and use of urban space—who (and what) is the city for? Differing views on the rights of vendors to work in public space are reflective of this contestation over the purpose of cities between neoliberal urbanism and a more radical, bottom-up urbanism. Proponents of the former see cities as drivers of growth that should be designed and operated to attract capital and promote growth. Therefore, they prioritize programs and policies that make cities attractive to investors, developers, and large corporations, including subsidies, incentives, and place marketing. This also often places them in opposition to vendors and their interests—vendors are seen as representing a certain form of

urbanism and urban life that is seen as antithetical and incompatible with neoliberal, growth-focused urbanism.

However, there are various ways that vendors and their allies in LA are working to change this narrative. One method exists within a traditional urban justice framework, articulating a right to public space for vendors. This tactic speaks to larger struggles around the production and right to urban space, including the theory of the “Right to the City,” as developed by Lefebvre (1991) and Harvey (2012), and adopted by urban justice movements across the world. This concept has since grown beyond its original framing to represent a multiplicity of urban social justice issues that challenge neoliberal urbanism, including anti-gentrification movements in places such as Zagreb (Caldarovic and Sarinic, 2009) and the US (Right to the City, n.d.), shack dwellers movements like Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa (Abahlali baseMjondolo, n.d.), and movements against the selling-off of parts of the city to corporate investors, such as the Mega-Spree Coalition in Berlin (Scharenberg & Bader, 2009). Many of these movements that use the right to the city as a rallying cry, and overall urban political framework, are centered on land use, including the right to access and use land for things such as housing, as well as the resistance of the privatization or selling off of the city to investors and other corporate interests (Mayer, 2012). It has also been used to frame street vendor politics in places such as Johannesburg (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2016), Lesotho (Matamanda, Kalaoane, & Chakwizira, 2023), Chicago, and Mumbai (Schoenecker, 2026). This method generally directly challenges the racial capitalist politics of contemporary cities, articulating a call for radical change in the organization and development of cities from top-down neoliberal urbanism to a politics that originates in the streets from the marginalized, dispossessed, and oppressed.

The other strategy does not involve trying to change the overall politics of the city but rather attempting to situate vendors within the existing framework by showing their potential value to the city. Vendors are characterized as entrepreneurs who provide significant economic value to the city—for example, statements and other materials put out by vendor rights organizations regularly refer to them as entrepreneurs. While this approach is reflective of real political beliefs about the importance of vendors to urban economies, it is also strategic in nature, and designed to persuade city lawmakers, businesses, and other stakeholders. It is also important to consider the implicit differentiation inherent in this approach—by identifying vendors as valuable due to their entrepreneurial nature, this can limit their worth to their ability to contribute to the local economy and the growth of the city. This can be seen as a form of respectability politics (Higginbotham, 1993), or politics that attempt to replace negative stereotypes of marginalized groups with alternative images that adhere to hegemonic social norms by situating some behaviors as desirable and others as antisocial, often coercing members of the group to act publicly in a certain way (Dazey, 2021). Crucially, these actions are typically internal, with members of the group imposing this form of social control on their “own.” In order to oppose the negative stereotypes of vendors as unproductive, undesirable, and representative of disorder, vendors and advocates frame themselves as entrepreneurial and thus critical to the economic growth and success of the city. Often in order to perform this role, vendors present themselves in specific ways which are palatable to city officials, elites and other advocates of the neoliberal city. This includes not only aesthetic and discursive aspects, but also a specific form of de-radicalized politics which is not overtly critical of normative conceptions of urban life based around economic capacity and production. This creates an intrinsic dichotomy between “respectable” vendors, or vendors who adhere to this performance of respectability, and those

who do not, or cannot, conform. This distinction between acceptable and unacceptable types of vendors can be seen as related to a larger process of differential inclusion (Cacho, 2012; Espiritu, 2003), under which subordinated groups are allowed access to some rights and protections from the liberal state, but are simultaneously included in ways that ensure their continued political, social, and economic subordination relative to other groups.

Although these approaches are often used in conjunction with one another, especially by non-profits and community groups that work closely with local government officials, there is an inherent tension in ideology between them. Fundamentally, neoliberal, entrepreneurial urbanism focused on capital accumulation is in conflict with an urban justice framework—not only do they prioritize and advocate for different things, but they are reliant on opposing political theory. Urban justice movements like the right to the city advocate for a city in which urban surpluses are dictated and controlled by the people who produce them, mainly the urban working class, while neoliberal urbanism advocates for the continued reinvestment of surplus for capital accumulation and urban growth. Additionally, the framing of the economy as structurally unequal and unjust seems to contradict efforts to bring vendors into it. Although vendors and their allies approach vending activism from both ideologies, changing their tactics based on who they are talking to, and in what context, they are not unaware of this inherent tension. One organizer at Inclusive Action discussed this explicitly, saying

I think we're also clear eyed that like, we're helping street vendors enter the economy, but “the economy” is kind of bad, is riddled with like, you know, structural injustices and systemic racism and barriers, right? And so like, we're bringing people into an economy that we recognize is fundamentally flawed and so how do we also change the economy to be more inclusive and accountable and responsive?

The organizer goes on to discuss this as pursuing short versus long term strategies. In the short term, they are “responsive to people suffering today,” while also fighting to make the economy more “inclusive, accountable, and responsive.” Because Inclusive Action is an economic justice organization that organizes across a variety of community issues, this includes actions designed to structurally change the economy like advocating for a transformation of the banking system, including the creation of a public bank, and increasing community ownership of assets and real estate. They also work closely with organizers both within their organization and at other groups on issues including housing and transportation justice, community public health, and immigrant rights. This displays the interconnectedness of vending and other community issues—the conditions of vendor’s lives are not just adjudicated through their experiences vending, but through the complex web of social, political, and economic relations under which they live. Moreover, their ability to vend is often also shaped by these relations—for example, a vendor may need secure housing with a kitchen to prepare food, or their capability to vend may be dictated by factors like access to transportation or childcare. The co-constitutive nature of vending and other urban issues are represented within an urban justice framework, which is built on an understanding of urban justice that is multifaceted and strategically both diverse and flexible. Therefore, while organizers often strategically frame vendors as entrepreneurial and drivers of growth, this discursive tactic should be seen within a larger framework of urban justice that understands the larger political project as one of transformation towards a more just and liberatory city.

## **5.4 Street Vending and the Production of Difference Through Urban Governance**

As previously discussed, the legalization and formalization of vending in LA is the result of decades of organizing and activism at multiple scales and is a victory for vendors and their rights. It finally allows vendors to operate legally in the city, not only recognizing them as legitimate economic actors, but also protecting them from unlawful harassment and persecution. However, even though it has had a significant impact on the lives of thousands of vendors in the city, it has also created conditions for new forms of differentiation and uneven inclusion.

### **5.4.1 Differentiation and Permits: Who Can Afford to Work?**

Prior to legalization, vendors were grouped together as illegal informal workers, in opposition to formal labor and brick-and-mortar businesses. However, while vending itself is no longer illegal, vendors are divided into legitimate and illegitimate based on the permitting system under which they operate. This operates as a form of differentiation based on recognition from the state—under this system, local governments have the authority to decide who is able to operate legally based on adherence to permitting laws.

There are a number of issues with this, many of which vendor organizers are working to address. Some of these are related to vendors' abilities to financially afford the permits and equipment required under local laws. For example, permits in many municipalities are expensive and thus might be out of reach for many vendors. The high cost is an issue that vendors and vendor organizations are working to address—for example, in the city of LA, permits were originally \$541 in 2017 when the original state law was passed. However, following a protracted advocacy campaign, the fees were eventually lowered to \$27.51 in 2024, reflecting the average

annual income of street vendors. This change represents a huge success for vendors and their allies and addressed a real problem with access stemming from unaffordability—when the fee was first established, only 944 out of an anticipated 16,000 permits were issued, meaning that the vast majority of the estimated 50,000 vendors in the city were operating illegally (Raman, 2024). However, although permit costs have been drastically lowered, equipment and commissary prices still remain unaffordable for many vendors—code compliant carts can range anywhere from over \$7000 to \$20,000 (not including paleta carts, which are a little cheaper) (Revolution carts).

Moreover, due to the complex geography of Southern California, permits prices can differ over just a few miles—for example, in Long Beach, which is south of LA, vendors must pay an initial fee of between \$250 and \$1,165 and an annual fee of between \$300 and \$730, depending on the type of food they are selling (generally, prepackaged foods are less, with hot food that is prepared on the spot costing more) (Diaz, 2024). Moreover, some municipalities, including Long Beach require vendors purchase insurance, which can be very costly. Long Beach does have a financial assistance program, but it only covers the first year of operating costs, as well as up to \$450 reimbursement for insurance, meaning that permits are still unattainable for many vendors (City of Long Beach, n.d.). The high cost of operating, as well as the complicated process for both accessing permits and accessing public funding support programs, means that many vendors in Long Beach are still operating illegally—as of late 2025, fewer than 14% of vendors who applied for business licenses have been approved (Sisneros, 2025). This has led to very high rates of citations and other enforcement actions—between early 2025 and February of 2026, the city had seized and discarded food from 72 vendors, issued 103 citations against vendors, and impounded 71 carts and other equipment (Sisneros, 2026).

Additionally, different types of vendors require different permits—for example, food vendors require more permits than merchandise vendors. The processes for accessing and obtaining permits can also be complex and confusing for vendors, especially those who lack digital literacy skills or who speak a language in which the permits are not available. This is also an issue of scale—although the legalization of vending occurred at the state level, it is the responsibility of individual local governments to create and oversee their own permitting regimes. Therefore, while these local ordinances must adhere to state law, there is often quite a bit of variation between them because the state law is relatively broad. For example, while some of the provisions in the state law are unconditional, such as the prohibition of legal sanctions for vending beyond administrative fines, there is a cut out for local governments which allows them to impose restrictions on vending if there is an “objective health, safety, or welfare concern” (Safe Sidewalk Vending Act). While these concerns must be established based on “objective” facts, because there is not an included definition or explanation of what this includes in the state law, interpretation has been left to the local level. This has allowed local governments to institute restrictions on vending under the rationale that they are protecting public health and safety. One example of this is the no-vending zones that were established in high-density tourist areas in LA, including the Hollywood Walk of Fame and the Hollywood Bowl. Although vendors eventually won a lawsuit finding these zones to be illegal, and the ordinance was ultimately repealed, the legal battle took extensive time and energy from local vendors and community organizations. Therefore, while the state law is designed to prohibit local governments from placing undue restrictions on vending in theory, in practice ensuring adherence to the law requires constant vigilance and legal contestations, which can be unrealistic and unsustainable for the local vendor organizations.

### 5.4.2 The Spatial Unevenness of Vending Ordinances

This relationship between the state law and the local implementation of the law has resulted in some local governments installing stricter regulations compared to others, with these patterns often being influenced by local relations of class, race, and politics. For example, the city of Fontana has instituted some of the strictest vending ordinances in the state designed to inhibit vending and ultimately drive vendors out of the city. These include requiring vendors to maintain prohibitively expensive multi-million-dollar insurance policies, which are not required of brick-and-mortar businesses, as well as undergo costly yearly LiveScan background checks. Additionally, the city stipulates that, under the permitting system, vendors agree that they utilize public sidewalks “at their own risk,” and that the city has no responsibility “to ensure public property is safe or conducive to sidewalk vending” (Ordinance no. 1789, n.d.) In other words, by possessing a permit and operating legally on public sidewalks, vendors in Fontana waive rights that all other city residents possess.

Because of these onerous requirements, many vendors in Fontana have been unwilling to apply for permits, an issue which is further exacerbated by the city’s use of private, third-party security contractors to enforce the permitting system. In addition to harassing vendors, these contractors unlawfully confiscate vendor’s carts and equipment, and throw away their food and supplies, which is authorized under local law allowing for the seizure of vendor property as “evidence.” According to a lawsuit filed by Public Council, in the year after they began enforcing this, officials confiscated perishable goods from vendors over 400 times. Public Counsel also found over 80 instances of impounded equipment (Public Counsel, 2025a). Fontana has also moved to oppress opposition to these ordinances by criminalizing interference with enforcement efforts—vendors who “interfere in any way” with city officials face fines and up to

six months imprisonment. This law is especially significant due to the use of private contracting company 4Leaf to threaten and intimidate vendors. There are numerous videos and testimony about groups of unidentified 4Leaf operatives in all black with balaclavas and face masks confronting individual vendors, ordering them to leave immediately, and confiscating their goods and equipment. Because these individuals generally do not dress like city officials or possess official city identification, and vendors are often the victims of violent crimes including organized theft, it has created a confusing and fraught situation where potential crimes are not only obfuscated, but also victims of those crimes can be prosecuted for protecting their private property.

The fact that these punitive and unlawful ordinances are being implemented in Fontana is not a coincidence, but reflects larger spatial conditions of class, race, and labor. As previously discussed, Amazon and other large corporations have constructed thousands of warehouses and distribution centers in Fontana and the Inland Empire as a whole. Additionally, Fontana is currently in the midst of a massive redevelopment plan which includes retail, restaurants, performance spaces, and housing. In order to protect these plans, and frame the city as welcoming to the kinds of people and businesses they wish to attract, which, as the deputy city manager explains, includes retailers, entrepreneurs, creatives, innovators, and artists, the city has enacted plans to rid the streets of undesirable people and activities, including street vending (Metz, 2024).

There is also a racial element to these efforts—local activists have called the persecution of vendors racist against Latino immigrants. Mayor Warren, a Republican and Trump supporter, has made explicitly anti-immigrant comments in the past, and has previously supported anti-immigrant legislation, as well as the 287(g) program, which allows local law enforcement to

act as immigration agents (Vargas, 2023). Because the majority of street vendors in Southern California are Latino, Fontana's ordinances, which include the potential for misdemeanor charges for "interference," put Latino immigrants in direct danger from ICE and DHS, especially undocumented vendors. Vendor advocates have explicitly called out the inequality inherent in the vending ordinance, with one resident telling the city council "It's fascist, classist, racist, xenophobic and a grave injustice" (Vega, 2024).

The geographic differentiation of vending ordinances is also significant because of the complexity of the organization of space in California. For example, the Greater Los Angeles area consists of five counties, including Los Angeles County, which alone contains 88 cities and approximately 120-125 unincorporated areas. This results in an incredibly complex and confusing administrative map, with different local governments operating in very close proximity to each other. Moreover, on the ground, it can be difficult to ascertain when one has left one municipal area and entered another—often, there are no official signs or other material signifiers. For vendors, this means that while they might be legally vending in one place, if they cross the street or move a small distance, they might accidentally enter another municipal area and thus are no longer operating legally. This is particularly an issue when areas with stricter ordinances abut more liberal areas—for example, Huntington Park, which borders the city of LA, implemented an ordinance that required fingerprinting to legally vend, which is not required in LA.

Regarding the complex spatial dimensions of cities in California that can lead to differentiation in formalization processes, it is also important to note the relationship between public and private spaces in urban areas. Throughout cities in California, there are many spaces which seem public but are in reality private, which can complicate legal vending. One example

of this is the Pike Outlets in Long Beach—this is an outdoor retail and entertainment complex that is built on the site of the classic Pike Amusement Park along Ocean Boulevard. The complex, which is located near the waterside in a downtown area popular with tourists, is designed in such a way that it can be difficult to easily distinguish public roads from the privately-owned roads within the complex. As a result, when designing the local ordinance on vending, the use of these private streets was an issue that the city council was forced to address with the Pike ownership. This was of particular concern because there were prior instances where vendors were unaware that they had left public property and entered a private street, meaning they were no longer under the jurisdiction of the local government.

## **5.5 Enforcing Street Vending in the City**

The city of LA's attempts to control vending through the various discursive and material tactics described previously impact the experiences of vendors on the ground. The described practices of differentiation and uneven inclusion condition the everyday life of vendors, including crucially their interactions with both the public and enforcement agents. The continued characterization of vendors as alien, anti-social, and undesirable has long permeated the public opinion, fostering negative perceptions of a vulnerable population. Despite ongoing efforts to combat these negative stereotypes, these deeply ingrained perceptions continue to persist, resulting in violence against, and harassment of vendors by the public. Over the relatively short duration of my fieldwork, there were numerous publicized confrontations with and attacks on vendors, including verbal and physical abuse, theft, and multiple instances of vendors suffering serious bodily harm or death. Moreover, the lack of safety experienced by vendors in the city, as

well as the perceived inability or unwillingness of the city to address this violence, has led to a general mistrust of, or outright contempt for, law enforcement.

### **5.5.1 Street Justice: Vendors, Violence, and Policing**

This high level of violence and abuse of vendors has drawn increased attention from various interested parties, including not only vendors, but also organizers and activists both on and offline, mainstream news sources, and public officials. However, it is unclear if the apparent rise in violence is a result of an actually increasing number of incidents, or if the proliferation of personal recording devices and corresponding social media access has allowed for more public awareness of an already existing issue. Across conversations with vendors and advocates, there is an understanding that violence has always been an issue for vendors, and therefore that the seeming rise in violence is likely a result of visibility. However, as described in the previous chapter, it is unclear if this amplified public awareness has served to reduce violence against vendors. While some have pointed to the ability to easily record harassment as potentially deterring or preventing perpetrators, vendors have also described how often the encounters are so unexpected and fleeting that they do not have the time or capacity to use personal devices to record. However, recording has proven to be a useful tool in identifying perpetrators, and calling for punitive measures to hold them accountable, including advocating for legal and employment repercussions.

The increased attention to the experiences of vendors on the street has also extended to the relationship between city enforcement agents and vendors. Many videos show police and code enforcement officials unjustly harassing vendors, including attempts to expel vendors and confiscate their property. For example, in 2023 a street vendor who was being harassed by police

fainted and had to be taken to the hospital after she was falsely accused of selling alcohol. Furthermore, the police subsequently refused to call an ambulance for the vendor and allegedly laughed when she fainted. The vendor's family also alleged that the same officer had taken her goods and threatened them in the past (Pérez, 2023). This can be seen as a related to over-policing, which describes how certain populations, including Black and Indigenous people, are disproportionately stopped by the police, subject to police violence, and overall targeted and harassed by police (Perry, 2006; Evans et al., 2014; Wendel, et al., 2022).

Moreover, not only do these video recordings often include harassment and persecution by police and other state operatives, but they also call into question the role of police in reducing or preventing violence and ensuring safety for vendors. Many content creators, aggregators, and consumers not only claim that these videos expose the inability of city officials to protect vendors, but some videos even show law enforcement's overt inaction in the face of violence against vendors, including literally standing by and observing vendors being harassed and attacked by members of the public. This also applies to the police's willingness to respond to crimes after they occur. For example, one video posted on Instagram shows a man bleeding from the head in front of his taco stand, which has been completely upended with all of his food and materials on the ground. The voiceover explains that an intoxicated man had swung a bottle at a female vendor, and then subsequently attacked the male vendor and destroyed their property. In response to this, the video description explains that the police took over an hour to show up, during which the perpetrator ran away. However, it continues to show community members driving up and down local streets, eventually hunting the man down and kicking him as he lay on the ground. In this instance, not only were the police unable to protect the vendors, but they also did not respond in a timely manner, leaving the local community to take matters into their own

hands. While the assault against the man was illegal, the comments on the video are overwhelmingly supportive, calling it “street justice,” and saying “I’m glad the raza stepped in.” The comments also address the lack of police support, with one reading “When you call the police always identify as a Caucasian victim. That will help them with responding faster,” and another arguing “When the badges don’t serve justice in time the community has to fight crime.” This seems to reflect an overall understanding of not only the ineffectiveness of local police, but their overt antagonism to vendors and Latino communities more generally, and thus the necessity for communities to protect vulnerable populations like street vendors themselves. One comment even reads “The police department is the enemy too” (enamoradoalex\_, personal communication, November 9, 2023). This frames the police as not just negligent, but actively antagonistic.

In other words, vendors are not only subject to over-policing, but also under-policing, reflecting the general relationship between police and marginalized communities in the US (Boehme, Cann, & Isom, 2022; Perry, 2006) Moreover, in this case, we can see the under-policing as itself a form of violence because it allows for violence against vendors to not only continue, but go unchallenged, rendering it seemingly normal, acceptable, and inevitable to witnesses and the public more generally. This is especially important in light of the increasingly violent and exterminatory rhetoric around immigrants and non-White people in the US today—normalizing violence against vendors compounds the danger they already face existing and working in public, showing how intersecting forms of vulnerability serve to structure their everyday lives.

Additionally, the complexity of the relationship between vendors and the city only complicates this dynamic—because of the nature of their work, including what and where they

are selling, vendors are subject to oversight from multiple city departments, and thus interact with multiple city enforcement agencies. This includes city police and Department of Health officials. This means that potential harassment or persecution can come from a variety of sources, meaning that vendors must be constantly vigilant. Even when vendors have all the necessary permits and are operating within the law, due to the complexity of the rules and regulations on street vending, as well as the deeply ingrained biases against vendors within both the police and city enforcement agencies, they may still be subject to illegal harassment.

### **5.5.2 Who Keeps Our Streets Safe? Interrogating the Role of Police in Cities**

It is also important to note the relationship between vending and community safety outside of the role of official policing. Many organizers point to vendors as playing an important role in strengthening and safeguarding community safety. Because they work on sidewalks and streets, vendors provide not only eyes on the streets, witnessing potential violence and crime, but also can serve as deterrents to potential criminals. This is especially true of vendors who operate at night—these vendors generally utilize lights, illuminating dark streets and discouraging crime. Moreover, because many vendors operate in working class neighborhoods, many of which suffer from disinvestment in physical infrastructures, they are often selling on streets with broken or missing streetlights, and therefore they are helping to illuminate streets which would otherwise be dark. The role vendors play in increasing public safety in vulnerable or marginalized neighborhoods contributes to the overall perception that the presence of vendors helps to create vibrant, healthy communities. This viewpoint is even expressed by some brick-and-mortar business owners, who claim that vendors are beneficial to the neighborhood because they are visible examples of lively and productive communities, and serve to bring foot traffic to their neighborhoods, which benefits their overall business. This is particularly important because it is

in contrast to the prevailing narrative that formal businesses are overwhelmingly hostile to informal vendors, and thus vendors and brick-and-mortar business owners are always in conflict.

The role vendors play in promoting and ensuring community safety, often in places where high levels of crime and violence have historically been pervasive, serves to undermine the alleged role law enforcement plays in protecting communities. It also helps demonstrate the role that police play in the neoliberal city, and in the nation as a whole. Scholars have examined the relationship between policing, private property, and social difference, including race (Walcott, 2021). This includes work tracing the history of policing to slave patrols in the south, groups of armed, white men responsible for controlling and disciplining enslaved populations, as well as hunting down and returning runaway slaves (Walcott, 2021). These groups were legitimized by the state in the *Fugitive Slave Act of 1850*, under which “federal commissioners were appointed for every county in the country, charged with responsibility for enforcing the law” (Stolberg, 2012, p. 2445). Although these patrols were disbanded following the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction, they laid the groundwork for future iterations of law enforcement which eventually culminated in contemporary police (Stolberg, 2012). Scholars have traced this lineage to show how historic and modern policing alike are designed to protect property and thus capital (Walcott, 2021).

This relationship between policing, property, and capital accumulation exists at various scales and places, including cities. Cities and policing, and the carceral system more generally, have long had an intimate relationship, with policing growing and evolving to reflect urban changes over time. Within the context of the contemporary neoliberal city, this has largely been a condition of the expansion and deepening of the carceral state. As previously discussed, urban neoliberalism has been characterized by economic restructuring, including reductions in

municipal expenditures for housing and other social services, the promotion of private enterprise as a more effective alternative to public investments, a shift to urban entrepreneurialism and a focus on growth, and urban renewal and redevelopment. Within this context, police and other state agents are operationalized to support these efforts, including the expansion of policing of the urban poor and people of color, especially in gentrifying neighborhoods (Story, 2019). Police harassment and criminalization help displace or eliminate undesirable populations and secure property values, especially new properties in historically disinvested neighborhoods.

Moreover, not only do they serve to advance the needs of capital through facilitating urban entrepreneurialism, but they also help manage the social externalities inherent to these processes. When cities undergo processes of neoliberal redevelopment, urban populations are necessarily marginalized and displaced—as scholars of racial capitalism remind us, capital growth and accumulation requires differentiation and hierarchization (Melamed, 2015). This social differentiation and the ensuing material inequality is managed through criminalization as overseen by the police. Poor, working class, immigrant, and non-white urban populations are controlled through various carceral tactics, including “broken-windows policing,” which has resulted in the aggressive criminalization of vulnerable urban populations, including poor and racialized people. Broken-window policing has been characterized as “the political expression of neoliberalism at the urban scale” (Mabie, Heatherton, & Camp, 2016, p. 2), especially because of its focus on activities that damage or threaten property and property speculation like vandalism, trespassing, street vending, and panhandling. This is particularly important because many of these largely victimless crimes are related to survival methods employed by the urban poor. This shows how under neoliberalism, police are responsible for not only facilitating exclusionary

growth policies, but also subsequently disciplining the growing masses of urban poor created by them.

Furthermore, under neoliberalism, this process is discursively framed as individualized—inequality stems not from the structural conditions of capitalism, but rather from a lack or failing of individual responsibility. Therefore, policing and criminalization are framed as the solutions to urban issues like homelessness and property crimes because they are the result of a failure of personal responsibility, rather than a consequence of unequal social relations under racial capitalism. This also allows for further differentiation and division between vulnerable peoples—as Noah De Lissovoy writes, “Networks of solidarity and obligations to the vulnerable are replaced by a culture of blame and externalization.... In this process, structural crises and contradictions are reinterpreted in moralistic terms, as the proper neoliberal subject recognizes itself through its exclusions of the pathologized other” (2012, 740). Within the neoliberal city, police serve to uphold the hierarchization of social relations necessary to advance growth and promote capital accumulation.

### **5.5.3 Where Does the Border End? Urban Policing as Immigration Enforcement**

Local police departments also play an important role in immigration enforcement in cities. As described at the beginning of the dissertation, interactions with police often put immigrant vendors in danger of detention and deportation by DHS and ICE and other immigration control bodies, regardless of criminal status. Although Cecilia was unlawfully arrested by a police officer, simply entering into the carceral system allowed for her to be forcibly moved to a detention center hundreds of miles away without the knowledge of her or her family, essentially disappearing her. This danger has only heightened with the second Trump

administration's severe crackdown and persecution of immigrants, which includes many immigrants who are in the country legally. Numerous scholars (Armenta & Alvarez, 2017; ; Coleman, 2012; Gomberg-Munoz & Wences, 2021) have illustrated how local law enforcement agencies support federal immigration control through both direct and indirect immigration enforcement. Moreover, even police actions that are seemingly unrelated to immigration enforcement such as traffic stops and arrests related to the issues around public space including homelessness, solicitation, and vending, are part of the "immigration control machinery" (Armenta & Alvarez, 2017, p. 7). For example, Varsanyi (2008) argues that police participate in immigration policing "by proxy" when enforcing public space ordinances in Phoenix, Arizona that target day laborers believed to be undocumented. They argue that these actions serve to exclude immigrants from public space due to a fear of persecution and deportation, including street vendors, who require public space to conduct their business.

Although LAPD has been adamant that they do not participate in immigration enforcement and have strict limits on cooperation with federal immigration agencies, recent reporting has shown that it is not so simple. For example, one *LA Times* article details how LAPD routinely shares fingerprint data with federal law enforcement, leading to several dozen detainments following arrests (Jany, 2025). Although the recent law mentioned in chapter 4 prohibiting the sharing of street vendor data with federal authorities protects vendors, there are examples from other cities of law enforcement ignoring similar policies on the sharing of data, including the widely-publicized sharing of license plate data via Flock automated license plate readers (Center for Human Rights, 2025; Koebler & Cox, 2025). Additionally, community activists claim that local law enforcement agencies in Los Angeles and the surrounding counties have been assisting federal immigration agents during enforcement operations (García, 2025).

The threat of calling immigration is also often used by police to harass vendor—for example, the officer who caused the vendor to faint allegedly said that she was not allowed to sell on the streets, and that he was going to call immigration (Pérez, 2023). Although the claim that she was operating illegally was false, and the officer also legally had no jurisdiction over sidewalk vending enforcement, the use of ICE as a threat can be just as impactful to vendors in terms of forcing them to move or vacate their vending area.

Although they are often still targeted and harassed by police, following the legalization of vending, code enforcement agents are now the main city officials vendors interact with, including health code inspectors. However, although they are not official law enforcement, these agents can still represent a threat to immigrant vendors. One example of this can be seen in a video posted on Instagram of a code enforcement agent harassing a vendor and illegally asking him for his ID. When he refuses to give it to the officer, as is his right, the agent threatens to call the police and send him to jail. Moreover, when the vendor asks what crime he has committed, the agent says that it is “Because you don’t have ID.” The agent then asks “You’re in the US without ID?” which implies that the refusal to illegally provide documents is evidence of undocumented status (labrujaguerrera, personal communication, November 2, 2023). Not only is this agent illegally demanding documents that represent citizenship status, but he is also putting the vendor at further risk by potentially forcibly involving him in a carceral system that has clear links with violence against immigrants.

Moreover, as Varsanyi (2008) argued, the danger posed by local enforcement agencies and their relation to immigration enforcement serves to exclude many vendors from public space, even if they are documented. This danger is further compounded by federal immigration agents themselves, who, under the Trump regime, have begun driving around the city and targeting

Black and Brown people through racial profiling. The inherent danger in simply existing in public has been hugely impactful on the vending community. Although local organizations have held many “Know Your Rights” workshops and presentations, this has not prevented immigration agents from illegally targeting vendors. As one organizer states “I can tell you as much as you, you want about like what your rights should be. But whether you can actually exercise those rights is a completely different question.” As a result, many vendors have ceased vending, either temporarily or permanently, which has put huge financial burdens on many vendors and their families. To address this, there have been numerous fundraising campaigns, including individual and neighborhood “buy outs” and a city-wide campaign from the LA Street Vendor Coalition (Sleep, 2025). LA County also started a Business Resiliency Fund, which provides up to \$5000 to businesses impacted by federal immigration enforcement. There are also efforts from vendors to protect themselves by vending near others. These vendors say that they feel safer in groups, and are able to be in solidarity with one another, with one undocumented vendor from El Salvador explaining

Among ourselves, vendors, we are taking care of each other. We have made ways to protect ourselves. If we see something, we warn each other. If something happens, we’re ready to get together and link arms so that if they take one, they take all of us. If they see a van, someone already warns. (Peña, 2026)

Many vendors have also created informal communication networks warning each other about potential raids and sightings of agents. However, despite efforts to protect and support vendors, many vendors are still too afraid to vend publicly.

The impact on vendors in LA of federal immigration enforcement makes visible the expansiveness of the border. As Walia (2021) writes, “the border is mobile and can be enforced anywhere within the nation-state” (p. 84). We can therefore see urban policing, and governance

more generally, as implicated in a larger project of bordering, and thus differentiation. Moreover, the expansiveness of the border contributes to the production of illegality—under racial capitalism, people are made illegal through various carceral laws and policies, including those related to immigration. Within neoliberal urbanism, this production of illegality is operationalized to produce and maintain the “desirable city,” or one which is centered around growth and capital accumulation.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how vendors in LA experience complex and interconnected forms of differentiation. In spite of the formalization of vending in 2018, many vendors are still harassed, criminalized, and generally excluded from the idealized neoliberal city. This differentiation is both discursive, through how vendors are characterized, and the narratives created around them, and material, including, for example, the division of vendors into legal and illegal operators through permitting. Therefore, not only are vendors alienated from other urban populations and therefore excluded from the imagined city, they are also divided internally, with some vendors being marked as legitimate and others as criminal or undesirable. These divisions are maintained and enforced through uneven policing, as well as the expansion of the border into the city.

In order to address and mitigate these various forms of differentiation and exclusion, vendors and their allies have turned to, among other things, digital activism and organizing. This work includes not only attempts to assert their place in the city through digital placemaking, but also the use of digital media to expose violence and harassment against vendors, advocate for accountability, and enact measures to protect victimized vendors. These actions also begin to

imagine forms of urban life that are not spatially and socially dominated by neoliberal urbanism and racial capitalism. We can see this as an interrogation of the question of who is the city for? As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, this is ultimately a question of planning— who has the right to pursue “particular types of change in order to produce the conditions under which social and cultural reproduction happen” (2007, p. 178). Through both their everyday occupation of urban space, as well as their political actions and ideologies, vendors are claiming this right every day. In their on and offline activities, vendors resist current exclusionary urban conditions, and articulate not only their right to the city, but more broadly, the potential for urban futures focused not on growth and capital accumulation, but on ensuring that all people in the city, especially the urban poor and working class, are able to thrive, rather than simply survive. This power to imagine and build urban futures is at the heart of vending conflicts

## **Chapter 6. Building New Urban Futures Through Digital Street Vendor Politics**

In chapter 4, I began to explore the ways street vendors and their allies use digital technologies not only to facilitate their labor, but also to advocate for their rights, including crucially their right to live and work in the city. As discussed in chapter 5, this fight for the right to occupy and work on public sidewalks and streets in the city is an ongoing and constant struggle vendors face, largely due to the complex and overlapping forms of differentiation and exclusion they are subject to under urban racial capitalism. To combat these processes, and the discursive and material conditions they produce, vendors use digital devices and platforms to promote safety and document violence, enact processes of digital placemaking, and create coalitions. This chapter will therefore further connect chapters 4 and 5, looking more closely at the socio-spatial politics produced by vendors and their allies through digital technologies. It will first critically examine tensions and conflicts both within the vendor rights movement, and external to it. It will then explore the kinds of urban imaginaries expressed through the digital contained within the movement for street vendor rights, asking “what kind of worlds are possible through the enactment of vendor politics?” Finally, it will investigate the connections across space and time between vendor activism and other urban and social justice movements and begin to theorize how vending activism is part of a broader politics of urban justice that attempts to refuse or overcome normative conceptions of liberal democratic inclusion under racial capitalism.

## **6.1 Complicating Vendor Politics: Tensions and Issues Internal and External to the Movement**

Over the past two decades, the LA street vendor movement has been incredibly successful, overturning over a century of city policy, and legalizing street vending in LA for the first time in its history. It has had a significant impact on the lives of vendors, as well as on the city as a whole. The rainbow umbrellas that proliferate the sidewalks and streets in the city now represent hope and the potential for thriving, rather than illegality and criminalization. However, there is still tension within the vendor organizing community regarding the scope and overall politics of the movement. Additionally there are structural issues external to the movement that also could potentially limit its effectiveness.

### **6.1.1 Conflict or Cooperation? Political Ideologies Within the Vendor Movement**

How radical should vending politics be? Is the ultimate goal inclusion into the current formal economy, or liberation from racial capitalism as a whole? In other words, how transformative are the politics of vending? What kind of worlds are they imagining, and what are the political actions necessary for their creation? There is no conclusive answer to this question within the vending and vending organizing and activism communities. Vendors themselves are varied in their approaches to politics and political organizing. Many vendors are mostly concerned with their immediate ability to support themselves and their families and thus are supportive of politics that attempt to advocate for economic inclusion. These vendors tend to gravitate towards organizations and advocacy groups that reflect this ideology. These politics are more entrepreneurial in nature, framing vendors as underutilized sources of profit for cities—in other words, they are independent contractors who are valuable to the city in their ability to facilitate the movement of capital. Policies advocated for by these vendors also tend to be more

technocratic in nature-- under this framework, the urban economy can be engineered and manipulated to be more inclusive and equal, the real issue is determining the most effective method of doing so. Often, this requires working closely with city governments, private brick-and-mortar businesses, and non-profits to find compromise solutions, creating a relationship of cooperation between vendors and the city.

There are also some vendors who emphasize the difference between vendors who vend the “right” way by strictly adhering to the vending ordinances, and those who do not, regardless of their ability to do so. These vendors criticize other vendors without permits as not following the rules and thus, as one organizer explained, argue that “the city is coming down on them because they’re not doing things right.” This creates division within vending communities themselves, especially when it relates to particularly sensitive or contentious issues like immigration enforcement. By characterizing vendors as legitimate or illegitimate based on their relationship with the state, these vendors understand city policy not as something to be resisted, but rather as a structuring force that allows them to distinguish themselves from traditional framings of vendors as undesirable, illegal, or malignant to the city.

In contrast to this political framework, other vendors have a more antagonistic view, with an understanding of the relationship between vendors and the city as contentious rather than cooperative. These vendors often align with more radical organizers and activists who often situate their politics in opposition to the state. Many of these activists see the struggle for vendor rights and entrepreneurial or growth-oriented urban politics as incompatible, and therefore advocate for liberation from, rather than incorporation into, contemporary racial capitalism. Unlike the more technocratic organizers who often work closely with the city, these more radical activists are often explicitly critiquing or challenging the urban policies and practices pursued by

city officials and therefore have a much more hostile relationship with them. Additionally, these activists tend to overall espouse more radical and left-wing politics.

Throughout the field work, I witnessed and experienced the difference in these political orientations many times. Although many organizers were hesitant to overtly critique other organizers and activists, there was a general understanding of the difference between the two projects. Overall, because of their more critical nature, the more radical faction was often more willing to explicitly identify the differences in ideology and tactics, often while criticizing the proclaimed inefficiency of the programs and policies created in coalition with the city. For example, one of the major issues vendors were facing when I was in LA was the inaccessibility of city-approved carts for hot food vendors, including predominately taco carts. The city had placed strict regulations on carts, including arbitrary bans on slicing fruit and reheating hot foods, and excessively large food storage and multi-compartment sink requirements. Due to these strict stipulations, all existing carts on the market were non-compliant. Moreover, cart designers and manufacturers were unable to design a legal cart that was not too large to fit on sidewalks and too heavy to push, meaning that compliant carts were functionally nonexistent. While these rules have since been modified, and code compliant carts exist today, at the time this was a major issue that prohibited many vendors from attaining permits and vending legally.

Moreover, even to this day, these carts are often prohibitively expensive—a tamale cart can run over \$8,000, while a grill cart can cost upwards of \$20,000 (Revolution Carts, n.d). For vendors, whose annual incomes average \$10,000, this is an astronomical price that most cannot afford. The city now has a program designed to provide some vendors with code-compliant carts for free—although carts are awarded through a lottery system, meaning that not all vendors will benefit from this program, they have invested \$2.8 million and have nearly 300 carts available,

which is a substantial investment by the city (Molina, 2026). However, at the time of the field work, this program was still in development, meaning that the only option at the time for cart vendors was paying for a very expensive cart that was not even necessarily legal. Moreover, because they were unable to access permits, many vendors had their carts confiscated and destroyed, meaning they not only lost their investment, but they also needed to purchase a new cart. This situation created tensions between organizers who were working closely with the city to develop the cart program, and activists who strongly criticized the city and its partners for their perceived inaction regarding this very crucial issue.

To address the lack of carts, some activists partnered with private cart companies to conduct giveaway events, where they provided vendors with free carts. These events often included music, food, and short speeches by vendors, activists, and representatives from the cart company, and were then publicized on social media. They also often featured partnerships with corporations like Taco Bell, who purchased carts to subsequently give away (revolution\_carts, 2023). In many of these posts, activists not only celebrated the vendor's procurement of a free cart but also used it as an opportunity to draw attention to the larger issue of cart inaccessibility. They discussed the high costs associated with the carts, as well as the strict requirements imposed by the city, linking this with overall structural issues faced by vendors. Some of these posts also included explicit critiques of the city government for their inaction with regards to the livelihoods of vendors, discussing how the formalization of vending in the city has only created new problems of accessibility and inequality among vendors. In addition to this critique, some activists also explicitly criticized local non-profits partnering with the city in the cart program, seemingly making a clear tactical distinction within the vendor advocacy community.

This tactical differentiation with regards to the provision of carts is also interesting because the activists working outside of the system are not necessarily critiquing capitalism in this instance, but rather the inaction of the city government. While it is possible to connect critiques of city inertia with larger critical discussions of who and what city governments are for under the urban neoliberalism that now characterizes racial capitalism in cities, in this instance the non-affiliated activists were actually promoting and working alongside private companies, including predominantly a company called “Revolution Carts.” Revolution Carts was one of the first companies to design and manufacture code-compliant carts in California, and therefore, they were able to provide legal carts far before the city was. In other words, these activists were advocating for a market-based solution to the issue—rather than development and production by the state, they argued that carts would be produced quicker and more efficiently by the private sector. This is unambiguously expressed in a podcast episode featuring vendor activists, including Alex Enamorado, and one of the founders of Revolution Carts, Matthew Geller. In this episode, Geller and Enamorado discuss the city’s long timeline for cart development, arguing that instead of developing their own cart over the course of 4 years, they should instead buy them from private companies like Revolution Carts, who have carts immediately available (unionofvendors, personal communication, November 6, 2023). These efforts eventually paid off over 2 years later, when the city finally rolled out their Sidewalk Vending Cart Program.

### **6.1.2 The Difficulty of Operating Under Hegemonic Racial Capitalism**

Beyond tensions within the vendor movement stemming from differing political orientations and ideologies, there are also structural and practical issues that influence the potential future direction of the movement. One example of this is the nature of politics and political institutions in the US. Vendors and their allies are perpetually affected by changing

political conditions at a variety of scales, meaning that they must be flexible and responsive to these changes. For example, one of the main drivers of the decriminalization of vending in the city of LA was the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and the resulting fears of immigration crackdowns, especially in so-called “blue cities.” The city council was persuaded by arguments from vendors and organizers that continuing to criminalize vendors would put them in increased danger of detention or deportation from the federal government—by involving vendors in the criminal justice system through misdemeanor arrests, the city was making it easier for these vendors to be targeted by immigration enforcement. These fears were not unfounded, as was shown in Cecilia’s story at the beginning of the dissertation. More recently, the wave of persecution of immigrants under the second Trump administration has prompted new legislation designed to further protect vendors, including a law prohibiting the sharing of vendor data and personal information with federal immigration enforcement agencies.

These are both examples of vendors and organizers taking advantage of particular national political moments to advance their goals and increase protections for vendors. They suggest that vendors are able to achieve desired outcomes through working within the current political system, and therefore pro-vendor politics do not need to be transformative or liberatory from racial capitalism. However, it is important to remember that the same opportunities the US political system offers that allow for these victories can also result in negative results for vendors. While the data protection law is crucially important for vendor safety, it pales in comparison to the overall increased danger and vulnerability vendors face under the Trump administration. The constant changes in political leadership, and thus policy, can engender oppression and exclusion in addition to potential avenues for positive change.

Moreover, while the party affiliations of elected officials might change from year to year, it is important to remember the overall system of racial capitalism around which contemporary politics are built. Although the Trump administration might be more aggressive and violent in its attempts to control and limit immigration, the overall ideology of bordering and migration control are not unique or new. As Walia (2021) writes, “Liberal lawmakers and their supporters might critique the overt, racist treatment of migrants under Trump’s reign, but they too naturalize the border’s existence and uphold the state’s right to exclude migrants through border rule” (p. 21). Borders and immigration practices and policies are integral to an understanding of global racial capitalism—punitive immigration policies and practices are methods of producing state-regulated relations of difference that allow for the movement and accumulation of capital. Therefore, while reacting to political changes within racial capitalism can achieve positive results for vendors, the overall political regime to which they are responding remains the same.

Moreover, although vendors were able to achieve inclusion into the formal economy within California, it is important to note that this inclusion is still differentiated. Because the formalization of vending does not in and of itself challenge the overall ideology of urban neoliberalism, the processes of exclusion and division integral to imaginaries of the entrepreneurial city still exist. As discussed throughout the dissertation, this often applies to vendors who do not fit within, or adhere to, the idealized conception of a street vendor as productive economic assets. This brings to mind Walia's concept of “commodified inclusion” which she uses to describe the inclusion of migrant workers, and the “crucial connection between their migration status and precarious labor position” (2021, p.7). While the inclusion of street vendors is not wholly reliant on their labor status like it is with migrant workers, there is a connection between the uneven inclusion of vendors and their perceived economic value. This

inclusion is also necessarily conditional and malleable. Just as changes in political authority can allow for the inclusion of certain groups into the formal state, it can also allow for their subsequent exclusion, or the inclusion of certain groups at the expense of others. Both of these considerations lead us to a question of who is actually being included under racial capitalism.

### **6.1.3 Capture by Capital? Accumulation by Dispossession and Street Vending**

The ties between economic value and inclusion for street vendors are also important because of the nature of neoliberal racial capitalism. As Marx (2024/1867) teaches us, capital requires movement, and must always be in motion, continually trying to create value from value, and seeking new avenues and spaces for accumulation. This requires constant growth and expansion, which, under neoliberalism, manifests as not only privatization, but also the creation of new markets where they previously did not exist. One example of this is Harvey's conception of "accumulation by dispossession" whereby the state creates new spheres of accumulation through privatization and enclosure of the commons. Rather than bringing people into capitalist labor relations, accumulation by dispossession instead produces an ever-growing population of people surplus to the needs of capital (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Li, 2010; Sanyal, 2014; Sanyal and Bhattacharyya, 2009). As previously discussed, scholars (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Sanyal, 2014) have examined the relationship between accumulation by dispossession and the rise of informal labor—many of these people rendered surplus, and thus excluded from the formal economy, enter the informal economy, with it serving as a structural safety valve for formal capitalism.

However, the relationship between the creation and growth of the informal economy and accumulation by dispossession is not merely unidirectional, with informality being the end point. Instead, scholars (Soederberg, 2012; Samson, 2015) have shown how "accumulation by

dispossession can also involve the formal economy capturing a sphere of accumulation forged within the informal economy” (Samson, 2015, p. 815). This work examines how the formalization of various informal enterprises, including informal banking and waste management, can represent accumulation by dispossession through the capture of these previously informal “spheres of accumulation” by capital and the state.

When applied to street vending, we can already begin to see the potential for its capture by private enterprise. One organizer mentioned this in regard to the Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations (MEHKO) program, which allows for the limited sale of food prepared in the home. While this program has been hugely beneficial to many vendors, allowing them to prepare food at home rather than paying the high rents for commissary spaces, it has also attracted attention from tech companies who see it as a potential new model for commodifying home cooking. Similarly, there is concern from organizers that formalization will lead to the creation of food truck empires, whereby wealthy brick-and-mortar business owners and investors are able to dominate the market at an economy of scale. This is particularly relevant to the rise of the gig economy, within which start-up companies utilize digital platforms to usurp existing markets, such as the lodging industry (i.e. Airbnbs replacing hotels) and transportation labor industries (i.e. Uber disrupting the taxi industry) (Vallas & Shor, 2020). As one organizer stated, “I also think that like, what we see with the gig economy is tech companies exploiting practices that have been around for a long time, calling it innovative and new.”

While this critique includes the capture of formal businesses like taxis and food delivery, it is particularly relevant to informal work like street vending, which often requires a substantial amount of organization and planning by vendors themselves. Because they have historically been marginalized within the city, street vendors have not had the benefit of formal, city planning,

meaning that they have, as one organizer argues, “had to work out arrangements to share public space in a system that excludes them and criminalizes them.” These arrangements represent years of negotiations within vending communities over the organization of space—who can vend where, what are the unwritten rules surrounding vending in certain places, and how are conflicts that arise navigated and resolved? Therefore, this informal planning provides the basis for urban accumulation and profit realized through street vending, without the costs related to creating and producing the sector that would necessarily accompany a formal industry. Moreover, in addition to the capture of the existing material resources of vending, it also represents the appropriation of vending as a valuable activity in and of itself. As Samson (2015) writes, accumulation by dispossession of the informal sector also involves the “heuristic framing of the material as valuable and the transformation of the social ontology that creates this as a social fact, both of which result from the intellectual and physical labor (and frequently concerted struggle) of informal workers” (p. 827). As discussed throughout the dissertation, street vendors in LA have spent decades repudiating negative public perceptions about them, and articulating not only their right to the city, but also their value to it. This discursive work has therefore created the conditions under which street vending is seen as a potentially valuable sector and thus is attractive to capital and capitalists. Therefore, we can see the potential for accumulation by dispossession of street vending through its increased commodification, leading to the expansion of capitalism within vending.

## **6.2 What Kinds of Worlds do Vending Politics Imagine?**

Despite the internal and external tension described above, street vending activism and organizing within LA are actively engaging in politics that allow us to imagine different ways of

living in cities. Because vendors are not only some of the most vulnerable workers in the city, especially non-white immigrant vendors, but also necessarily require access to free and unencumbered public space, they allow us to critically analyze who belongs in the city and under what conditions belonging is mediated. Street vending can therefore be seen to represent the encapsulation of a variety of contemporary urban issues—because they must necessarily occupy and utilize public space for their work, they are often some of the first in the city to experience the processes of enclosure, exclusion, and other methods of controlling urban space that epitomize the city under contemporary racial capitalism. Therefore, when thinking about the complex and often contentious politics organized around the production and management of cities, it is useful to look to street vendors and street vendor activism. What can the struggles for spatial, social, and economic equality undertaken by vendors help us understand about the potential for new urban futures that are not constituted by exclusion, differentiation, and overall inequality?

### **6.2.1 Public Spaces for the Public Good: Vending and the Right to Streets, Sidewalks, and Parks**

Because it occurs on city streets and sidewalks, and in city parks and other open spaces, conflicts over vending are inherently a struggle over the meaning and use of public space. As discussed previously, questions of who has the right to use public space, and for what purpose, have long been questions at the center of urban politics. Although it is often theorized as idealized democratic spaces of equal access and participation (Parkinson, 2012; Carr et al., 1992), numerous scholars (Ehrenfeucht & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007, Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Miller, 2007; Mitchell, 2003) have shown how in reality, public spaces in the contemporary city have always been sociospatially unequal, with access to them being tenuous

and highly uneven. For example, Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris (2007) have written about how the use of sidewalks was historically unequal, with Black people expected to step in gutters in order to let white people pass. Access to and use of public space has generally reflected the social, economic, and political rationalities of the city, which, as previously described, are currently increasingly neoliberal and entrepreneurial, meaning that they often exclude urban populations that are seen to challenge or undermine this overall urban ideology, including not only vendors but also the homeless, drug users, and young, non-white, and poor people. As scholars (Mitchell, 1995) have shown, these attempts to control public space through excluding certain populations are directly linked with value and profit—for example, local business owners are often concerned with losing customers, and homeowners are worried their property values will fall.

The successes of street vendors in LA seems to challenge this overall ideology, advocating for an understanding of public space as something that should rightfully be accessible to all urban populations, not just elites or those who represent potential economic value to the city. It is also a critique of the enclosure of public space, and the exclusion of certain kinds of people from them. In LA, many public parks are periodically physically closed to vendors, with local officials erecting literal barriers in the form of fences to displace vendors from community spaces (Bennett et al., 2021). Moreover, the enclosure of public parks to vendors is linked with larger processes of enclosure and exclusion in the city—for example, the fencing of Echo Park in 2021, which prevented vendors from operating there, was part of a larger show of force against unhoused people living in encampments in the park (Corado, 2021). Therefore, by articulating their right to occupy and use public space, vendors are arguing for more than just their individual rights, but for a new conception of public space as free and open to all, especially the most

vulnerable people who require its use. This is in line with the idea of the Right to the City (Harvey, 2012; Lefebvre, 1968), which argues that the right to organize and use urban space belongs to those who produce it, meaning the urban working class.

However, it is also important to remember that some advocates frame vending as economically profitable and valuable, and vendors as entrepreneurs. This formulation of vending and vendors does not seem to challenge the underlying understanding of public space, and indeed cities as a whole, as valuable for their ability to facilitate the movement and accumulation of capital, and the promotion of growth. Instead, it implies that vendors should have access to sidewalks, streets, parks, and other public spaces because they will create economic growth through their use. In this way, public space is characterized as valuable only when it allows for movement and accumulation of capital, meaning that empty and unproductive space must be commodified and made profitable. Public space itself holds no value for the city and therefore is useless unless animated by capital. Again, this relates to the question of who and what cities are for—are they for the people who currently live in them and enjoy the non-material benefits public space provides them, or are they for people and activities that promote capital accumulation and growth?

However, as discussed previously, this tension between entrepreneurialism and economic justice is clearly understood by many vendor organizers. Moreover, the mere presence of street vendors on sidewalks and streets can be seen to represent a more just view of the city. As Mitchell (2003) writes, street vendors have historically been categorized with other groups who use public space in ways which are seen as undesirable or objectionable, including unhoused people and sex workers. Therefore, when vendors advocate for their right to occupy and use public space, they are lobbying for more than just an individualized right to productive activity.

They are instead opposing a broader urban political framework which sees public space as something to be contained and limited in order to maintain normative sociospatial conditions. By demanding their right to occupy space in the city, they are challenging the hegemonic racial capitalist ideology underlying urban politics and engaging in what Schoenecker (2026) has called a “politics of presence.” Drawing on the work of Darling (2017), Schoenecker argues that simply by “existing in and using public spaces,” informal street vendors are reimagining the city as one that is more equitable, just, and overall represents the potential for not only surviving, but thriving.

Beyond their relationship to public space, street vendors and their allies are therefore challenging overall narratives and perceptions about who belongs in the city—in other words, who is the city for? As described, both historically and contemporarily, vendors are often framed as foreign invaders to a city, not only undesirable but actively harmful. Throughout the field work, these narratives were not only observed, but they were also explicitly discussed in interviews as one of the largest issues facing vendors in LA. Throughout the campaign and to this day, combating these negative perceptions has been one of the top priorities of the movement, working to change the opinions of not only elected officials, but of the public as a whole. This dissertation has examined a number of ways this is being achieved, including practices of digital placemaking which allow vendors to articulate, and advocate for, their place in the city. By framing vendors as crucially important to local communities, vendors, organizers, and activists are making larger claims about who, and what, cities are for. In contrast to entrepreneurial neoliberal urbanism, which is dedicated to attracting capital generating populations and corporations, this is an articulation of an urbanism that sees cities as being for everyone who lives and works in them, especially typically marginalized urban populations like

not only vendors, but also the urban poor, including unhoused people, many of whom occupy the same sidewalks as vendors. Street vending organizing and activism is thus part of a larger urban justice movement that not only sees urban politics as representing a progressive alternative to more conservative state and federal politics but also one that challenges the framing of cities as entrepreneurial and growth-oriented, and thus necessarily exclusionary of certain urban populations.

### **6.2.2. Working in the City: Connecting Urban Formal and Informal Labor**

However, it is important to remember that street vendors are urban labor populations, and therefore are not only connected with politics of public space, but are also linked with the conditions of the urban working class. While formal and informal labor movements are typically conceptualized as separate and different, not just representing different people but also different frameworks, ideologies, and goals, the interconnectedness of the formal and informal spheres complicates this narrative. In contrast to theories of informal labor as a constitutive outside of formal labor, scholars (Gidwani & Wainwright, 2014; Samson 2015) have shown how these labor spheres are not mutually exclusive. Rather than informality being a permanent state of being, people move between wage labor and informal labor, meaning that the formal and informal economies exist as part of a dynamic, interrelated whole.

Understanding this relationship is especially important not only because changing global labor conditions have led to increased informality and casualization of formal labor, but also because the conditions of formal labor in cities are directly linked with participation in the informal sector. As one organizer noted, part of street vendor organizing is a “recognition of really profoundly unjust barriers in the formal economy, right, barriers to entering the formal

economy and barriers to getting work and barriers to getting good work and victims of wage theft.” It is the conditions of labor in the formal sector which push many vendors to informality, meaning that addressing the conditions of street vending as informal labor necessarily includes an understanding of its co-constitutive nature with formal labor. This is also important because not only do many workers move between the formal and informal economies, but also many vendors have family members who are being exploited as wage laborers.

This close relationship between formal and informal labor, and their conditions in cities, allows for an understanding of how vending activism is imagining new frameworks of urban labor. These conceptions are relational, intersectional, and representative of the wide range of work performed by poor, marginalized, and vulnerable urban populations. Vendors explicitly connect their labor with other forms of work—for example, CPC members supporting a California Faculty Association strike at California State University posted a story on their official Instagram account that read “trabajadores unides,” showing an understanding of workers as spanning both formal and informal sectors (CPCollective, personal communication, 12/4/23). Other stories about the strike by CPC echoed these framings, proclaiming “solidarity” and a shared “struggle for labor rights” (CPCollective, personal communication, 12/6/23). Moreover, this shared struggle is even more crucial to the vendor movement because of the aforementioned links between formal and informal work, not only theoretically, but within the lives and families of vendors themselves. As organizers and vendors have explained, families often include people performing both formal wage labor and informal vending. Therefore, the conditions of formal labor are often instrumental in shaping the urban lives of vendors and their families. As one organizer states “within one family, like we talked to street vendors and their, their family members are employees who are victims of wage theft. Yeah, so yeah, you know, you're at the

family level, at the community level, these barriers are very much intertwined, and sort of a broader system, an unjust economic system.” This understanding of the interrelated nature of formal and informal labor under racial capitalism as embodied through vendors and their families shows the potential for theories of labor that are relational, intimate, and grounded in urban politics.

### **6.2.3 “The More We Unite, the Stronger We Become:” Street Vending Politics and Creating Anti-racist Cities**

One other crucial aspect of street vending in LA that has been discussed in the previous chapters is the large population of immigrant vendors, many of whom are from countries in Latin America. Because of recent increases in immigration enforcement at the federal level, immigration and immigration politics have become central to urban politics in cities across the US. In cities like Minneapolis, New York, and LA, organizers and activists have clashed with police and federal agents, protecting their neighbors and promoting their cities as one in which immigrants are not only welcome, but important parts of the community. Additionally, local governments have embraced the framing of cities as spaces of protection for immigrants, including the designation of some cities as sanctuary cities (Bryant, 2025). These urban political movements are crucial to street vending in LA because not only are many vendors immigrants, but they also represent some of the most vulnerable immigrants in the city because they must work outside in public space, putting them in danger of being targeted by the roving bands of militant enforcement agents. Therefore, we can also see vending politics as advocating for cities that are not only inclusive to immigrants, but are explicitly supportive of their needs.

However, it is important to not idealize social justice movements like the vendors rights movement. In spite of the centrality of these politics of belonging within vendor activism and

organizing, there is an enduring tension due to the hegemonic effects of differentiation under racial capitalism. Similar to how racialized differentiation is produced through state policies and practices, including bordering and citizenship, it is also reproduced within vendor and activism communities themselves. For example, within the fieldwork, there was occasionally conflict and friction between racialized groups, predominantly between Latino and Black people. One example of this previously discussed in the dissertation is the conflict in Fontana between immigrant, Latino vendors and their allies and the mayor, Aquanetta Warren. The relationship between race and the repressive policies of the Fontana city council are complicated by the fact that Warren is the first Black mayor of a city that has a long history of segregation (Vega, 2024). Warren's defenders have argued that the opposition to her itself is racist and anti-Black, placing many in the Black community in Fontana against the majority Latino population. Over the course of the dispute over the implementation of vending ordinances in the city, both sides occasionally used racialized, disparaging language. This is indicative of a larger trend observed during the social media observations—because of the heterogeneous nature of social media activism, some commenters used racist stereotypes and language to create and underline divisions between groups, often painting one side as victim and the other as perpetrator. Although the activists themselves generally did not do this, they are largely unable to dictate the reactions to their content within the comments.

Many people in LA also have an understanding of the importance of solidarity across difference with regards to race. While there are many members of the public who verbally and physically harass vendors, there are also many people in LA who support vendors because they recognize them not only as fellow humans, but as vulnerable peoples who have experienced various forms of oppression and persecution. Often this support is based on an intersectional

understanding of relationality under the repressive regimes of racial capitalism—they themselves have been the victims of global racial capitalism, just like street vendors.

One example of this solidarity occurred in Glendale during the harassment of a vendor by an Armenian-American man named Emanuel Gulakian. Gulakian had a history of harassing vendors, including hurling racial slurs and epithets at vendors, as well as physically assaulting them by throwing pieces of concrete “as big as softballs” (Campa, 2023). He was eventually arrested and charged with a hate crime due to his racist harassment, but prior to his arrest, he was filmed multiple times violently attacking vendors in Glendale. As a result, he briefly became very notable in online vendor activism spaces, with activists eventually discovering his name and workplace, as well as union membership in SEIU. Also, in addition to this online work, Gulakian became so well-known that vendors and activists on the street began to recognize him, leading to offline confrontations between him and activists, as well as members of the public sympathetic to vendors. His Armenian heritage also became a point of conversation due in part to the large Armenian community in LA.

This culminated in a video in which he is seen arguing in Armenian with two other Armenian men, who are defending a street vendor that Gulakian apparently had been harassing prior to the recording. According to text on the video, Gulakian asks “Why are you standing up for the Mexicans?” to which one of the men responds “we know what it feels like to be oppressed.” This understanding of solidarity across and through shared experiences of oppression is continued in the comments, including people posting the Mexican and Armenian flag emojis, as well as comments such as “Props to the Armenian Homies. That’s why we ride together,” “Armenians looking out for the Raza,” and “The more we become united the stronger we become. With respect, we all must check our own and make sure we hold each other

accountable” (enamoradobackup, personal communication, December 4, 2023). In this vein, while there are negative comments claiming that Armenians are racist and are not allies to the Latino community in LA, there are many more comments refuting those claims, calling the commenters themselves racists. There are also a number of comments remembering the Armenian genocide, identifying it as a structuring event in the history of Armenians that allows them to understand and be in solidarity with vendors. This is just one example of cross-cultural solidarity engendered through the support of vendors in LA, showing the potential for localized street vendor movements to produce urban politics that transcend racial, ethnic, and national differentiation.

### **6.3 #ProtectStreetVendors: Building a Global Movement for Social Justice Through Street Vendor Politics**

How then can street vending politics expand both geographically and materially to help build new liberatory urban futures? Although street vendor politics can begin to imagine different forms of urban life, how can these very localized movements expand beyond vending in specific places? In looking at how current organizers and activists conceptualize their work, we can begin to see pathways for achieving this. Moreover, these political actors are already pursuing strategies and tactics that extend and expand the movement.

For example, there is an understanding of the importance of spatial connections and solidarity in the movement going forward. Current organizers have discussed the importance of creating and maintaining networks of solidarity across space. This is especially important because of the aforementioned complexity and expansiveness of the geography of Southern California—while LA organizers can, and do, work within areas that are neighboring or very close to the city, the farther a municipality is from LA, the harder it is for them to operate in a

meaningful way there. In spite of this, because of their successes in LA, Inclusive Action and other coalition partners are constantly being approached by vendors and organizers in other cities for help with their local ordinances. Although they do often provide the requested aid, they do not currently have the capacity to organize and coordinate movements in places outside of the city of LA and therefore cannot help with all cases. To address this, one organizer mentioned the potential for creating training and educational resources to pass on the knowledge they gained from their experience with the LA campaign. Not only would this provide guidance to the requesting organizers, but it would also support the scaling up of the movement, which helps to buttress the overall state law—the more cities and municipalities that formalize successfully, the stronger the law is, and the harder it is to rescind. Connecting through actions like the sharing of expertise and experience also builds and strengthens the vending organizing community in southern California and beyond by bringing more people into the movement and building strong community groups that are able to organize around particular localized conditions. This is especially important because the conditions of vending and the subsequent politics around them are highly localized, meaning that they are best addressed by local vendors and organizers who have the grounded knowledge of that place. As one organizer states, it is important that “we’re not just coming in and trying to organize a whole new community that we don’t even know.” Just like how the LA campaign is built on the geohistory of vending and activism in the city, so too should the organizing work outside of the city be built on the unique conditions of a place.

However, as Massey (1994) reminds us in their discussion of a “global sense of place,” specific cultural and material conditions are produced through global interactions and flows, and thus a sense of place can only be constructed “by linking that place to places beyond” (p. 156). Specificity of place is produced through “a distinct mixture of wider and more local social

relations,” combined with “the accumulated history of a place,” which itself is “the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world” (p.156). This understanding is relational, showing how places are not unique in an absolute sense, but rather in the ways in which they are related to other places, and the effects these relationships have had on the material and cultural conditions of that place. Therefore, just as the LA movement is built on not only the localized conditions of LA, but also on an understanding of the linkages between contemporary LA and other times and places, organizing outside of LA should also be simultaneously local and non-local, using the knowledge of LA organizers to deepen and strengthen the work within their own communities.

Moreover, this expansiveness is not only geographic, but also inherent in theorization of vendor politics itself. Consistent throughout the fieldwork was an understanding of vending as inextricably linked with urban conditions as a whole. The everyday lives of vendors are not just shaped by the conditions of their labor, but also by their relationship to other urban issues, including housing, transportation, and access to affordable resources like food. Having the freedom to vend legally throughout the city is not meaningful if a vendor is unable to easily travel throughout the city—for example, a day in the life of a vendor might include beginning the morning by traveling from their homes to where they store their cart, then to the commissary where they prepare food, and then to the areas where they vend, with them reversing this journey at the end of the day. These journeys can be long and require multiple forms of transportation, especially because many of the commissaries that vendors can use are far away from the most lucrative vending areas. The complicated geography of vending in LA is physically expansive and encompasses far more than merely having access to spaces in which to vend. Similarly, the creation of programs like MEHKO, which allow vendors to prepare limited amounts of food in

their home kitchens, require access to affordable housing with kitchens appropriate for food preparation. Therefore, vending politics necessarily take a holistic approach, recognizing vending rights as part of a larger project of urban justice which is dedicated to ensuring that poor and working class Angelinos are able to equally participate in urban life.

Within vending activism and organizing in LA, there are also connections made with other formal labor movements—for example, CPC materially supported striking faculty members at Cal Poly Pomona by attending the picket lines with signs and food. There is also an understanding of the interrelatedness of formal labor and informal labor by activists. For example, when discussing the harassment of vendors by the employee of Plan B nightclub in a video on Instagram, Alex Enamorado includes news articles about labor issues related to the club, including claims by models that their images are being used to market the club without their permission and without compensation (enamoradobackup, 2023b). The video explicitly ties the exploitation of workers to the club's anti-vendor violence, reflecting an understanding of these conflicts as stemming from the same place, and thus representing the same overall political ideology. Because of the aforementioned changes in labor globally away from formalized, protected labor, towards casualization and informalization, these kinds of comparisons are important not only because they indicate how vendors and allies conceptualize informal labor as related to formal labor, but also because they allow for a politics of labor that does not take the differentiation of workers for granted. As mentioned, the division and hierarchization of people, especially workers, is fundamental to the production and maintenance of racial capitalism at all scales. Therefore, by emphasizing the ways in which formal and informal workers are linked politically, pro-vendor politics refuse this partitioning in favor of a politics of solidarity organized around living and working in the city.

Moreover, scholars (Agarwala, Tilly & Firdausi, 2025) have also shown the potential for informal labor organizing to engender new, more experimental, forms of labor organizing. In contrast with traditional labor organizing, or the “industrial union model,” which assumes “a legally protected formal employment relationship and a fixed workplace,” informal labor organizing allows for “alternative models that are more relevant to contemporary structures of globalized and neoliberal production” (Agarwala, Tilly & Firdausi, 2025, 714). While these alternative approaches have both succeeded and failed to protect and strengthen the position of informal workers, overall their willingness to be experimental and responsive to grounded changing and evolving relations grounded in specific sociospatial contexts can be seen as representing the potential for the revitalization of labor power under contemporary global racial capitalism as realized through grounded urban politics.

This holistic approach to vending as one aspect of a larger urban political project encompassing not just vending, but also other issues like formal labor, transportation, and housing is important not only for local urban politics in LA, but also because it allows for a framing of vending activism as connected with social justice issues globally. Throughout the fieldwork, there was evidence of an understanding of vending politics as linked with other social justice movements, including not only local issues like housing and transportation, but also non-locally specific ones like immigration and the genocide in Gaza. For example, vending coalition members commonly attended and participated in pro-Palestine marches and actions, carrying banners proclaiming their position as street vendors, and expressing their support of people in Gaza. Additionally, because of the multifaceted nature of the issues they face as not only vendors, but also immigrants living under exclusionary urban regimes, often the politics expressed at these protests and rallies were heterogenous and reflected the various forms of

intersecting activism they were involved in. Many of these participants carried signs and banners that clearly expressed their understanding of links between their experiences in LA, and those of Palestinians in Gaza. For example, one CPC post on Instagram showed members at a protest carrying a banner that read “From Mexico to Palestine all the walls have got to go,” drawing connections between limitations on movement in US and Palestine, as well as conditions faced by Latino–American migrants and Palestinians (cpcolectivo, personal communication, November 13, 2023). In addition, the caption below the post reads “We march because many of us were forced to leave our own countries due to colonial, imperial, and capitalist forces. We march because we are fighting for our homes against wealthy developers who force our entire communities out so they can get richer,” which shows a sophisticated understanding of global capitalism and its local manifestations (cpcolectivo, personal communication, November 13, 2023).

Another example of this is the multiple posts on Gaza from Alex Enamorado which draw connections between violence faced by Palestinians and by people of color in LA, especially vendors. For example, on November 7th he posted a video discussing the murder of a street vendor in Gaza by the Israeli settler state. In the video, a voiceover describes the importance of the vendor to his local community, as well as his defiance in the face of genocidal violence, saying “Throughout the war in Gaza, he stood as a protector of the poor and refused to leave his home and streets until the occupation exacted its revenge by bombing and killing him” (enamoradoalex\_, personal communication, November 7, 2023). This language of the important role that vendors play not only in supporting their communities, but also in promoting safety and helping to protect vulnerable people, reflects discourse on vending in LA. Enamorado included a caption below the video, which included a discussion of the injustice of the genocide, and ended

with him writing “Our goal at @unionofvendors is to expand world wide and you will be seeing that for decades. We are here to stay to protect street vendors from all colors of life.

#protectstreetvendors” (enamoradoalex\_, personal communication, November 7, 2023). This is a very clear declaration of the expansive geography of vending and vending activism, as well as the strong connections between vending conditions at home and abroad.

There is also an understanding of the power inherent in linking social movements globally, especially when activists are speaking out about particularly contentious issues. For example, as discussed in chapter 4, Enamorado’s Instagram account was suspended, which not only limited his ability to raise awareness about issues facing vendors, but also disrupted the large online community he had built. While it is impossible to know the exact reason for his suspension due to the largely obscured content moderation process used by large platforms, there was much speculation in the comments about what content in particular led to the suspension. In addition to discussing the potential danger organizing poses to the state, one commenter wrote “They didn’t do this until you spoke up about Israel smdh,” to which Enamorado replied “that part,” agreeing with the sentiment (enamoradobackup, 2023a). Other commenters agreed with this theory, including multiple commenters claiming that their accounts were also suspended after posting about Palestine. Some commentors also drew explicit connections between the repression of pro-Palestinian and anti-white supremacy activism, with one comment reading “Can’t speak against the Zionist agenda or racism/colorism in our own community” (enamoradobackup, 2023a). This shows an understanding not only of the interrelation between marginalized people globally, and the oppressive and exterminatory politics that condition their lives, but also of the threat posed by intersectional and linked global social justice movements to the hegemonic racial capitalist politics of the US and its allies.

This understanding is integral to the positioning of vendor activism, including more specifically the activism engendered around the arrest of the Justice 8—one digital graphic calling for activists to pack the courthouse that circulated during the Justice 8’s pre-trial hearings reads “Our communities are wrongfully raided and imprisoned from Palestine to the Inland Empire. Our activism should not be considered contempt.” In addition to the clear proclamation of the relationship between pro-Palestinian and pro-vendor activism, the post also includes a hashtag in the caption which says #Latinomuslimunity (freeyourselffonzo, 2023). This is an expansive understanding not only of the ways in which global racial capitalism enacts the similar forms of violence against different communities based on specific sociospatial relations, but also of the importance of solidarity between social movements across space—just as racial capitalism is able to transcend borders, so too must fights for social justice.

Therefore, vending politics should be understood as inextricably linked not only with other local urban issues, but with social justice movements globally. Through bringing together these localized movements, activists and organizers are contributing to the creation of a broader intersectional conception of sociospatial justice at various scales and places. The street vendor movement brings together issues of labor, immigration, and urban life, including the right to the city, and not only grounds them in the city, but also transcends the boundaries of the city, extending them across space at a variety of scales. Moreover, as discussed, this is explicitly a movement of the urban poor and working class, a politics from below. These movements have been theorized in a variety of ways, including “subaltern/slumdog politics” (Roy, 2011), “occupancy urbanism” (Benjamin, 2008), “political society” (Chatterjee, 2004), and “insurgent citizenship” (Holston, 2009). It is important to note that historically, these frameworks have been used to describe politics in the global South. However, as the differences between the core and

the periphery begin to blur, we can understand street vendor politics as an example of these politics from below in the global North. This not only allows for a deeper understanding of not only the experiences of subaltern or marginalized people in the North, but also the connections between the South and North as produced and dictated by racial capitalism.

We can also think about how these politics relate to a larger project of global abolition, which seeks to destroy “all kinds of distinctions and categorizations that divide us — innocent/guilty; documented/ not; Black, white, Brown; citizen/not-citizen” in order to create “the possibility of full and rich lives for everybody” (Gilmore, as cited in Loyd, Mitchelson & Burridge, 2012). Abolition seeks the transformation of social relations that produce “hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore, 2022, p. 475). Reflective of the global nature of racial capitalism as it produced across time and space, abolition “is constituted by so many acts long overlapping, dispersed across geographies and historical moments,” showing its potential for bringing together specific grounded actions and movements into a larger project of abolition and liberation that transcends the bordering and division inherent to global racial capitalism (Rodríguez, 2019). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2012; 2022) reminds us, racial capitalism requires constant maintenance and “scheming” in all places, times, and scales in order to continue its hegemonic existence. Therefore, a global project of abolition and liberation that joins together overlapping and interrelated localized movements has the potential to disrupt this regime of maintenance, forming hundreds of cracks within the complex apparatus that constitutes racial capitalism, until eventually the entire system shatters and collapses. Moreover, this destruction is only possible through connection--crucial to this abolition project is the re-establishment of our fractured social relations. If racial capitalism requires differentiation at every level, in every

place, and within every aspect of life, it is crucial that liberatory political movements directly confront this by bringing people back together through connecting our shared struggles and building the world we want, one that is free from the overwhelming domination of racial capitalism.

## **6.4 Conclusion**

This chapter brought together chapters four and five to begin to theorize how vending and vending politics are not only imagining new forms of urban life, but also actively forming connections across space at multiple scales, creating the potential for transformative and intersectional global politics manifested through grounded, localized urban movements. However, because it is important to also interrogate idealized or utopian politics, this chapter begins with a discussion of tensions both within and outside of the movement, as well as an acknowledgement of the structural issues the movement faces, including the overall political ideology that dominates immigration politics in the US, as well as the differentiation that still exists in spite of the formalization of vending. It also begins to think about the potential for capture of the street vending sector by private finance, theorizing this as an example of accumulation by dispossession under racial capitalism. This is particularly important because capitalism is constantly changing and evolving to ensure the flow and accumulation of capital. Resisting the domination of racial capitalism therefore requires constant vigilance and an understanding of the continued necessity to examine and interrogate vending practices and politics. This is similar to the ongoing oversight and supervision vendor organizers and activists must apply to municipal governments to ensure they are adhering to the state vending ordinance, and not illegally oppressing or criminalizing vendors. The fight for vendor rights does not end

with formalization, but is an ongoing battle waged at multiple scales and against multiple enemies.

Beyond the tensions and issues facing the vending movement, this chapter also began to theorize how vending and vending politics imagine new urban worlds that are built not on exclusion and differentiation, but on a right to the city. Through their everyday practices, they articulate a right to open and accessible public space. Although the framing of vendors as entrepreneurial could be seen as framing public space as valuable only in its ability to facilitate the movement of capital and encourage urban growth, their use of public space can also articulate a politics of presence, whereby simply by occupying space, they are challenging hegemonic conceptions, and reimagining it as a free and equitable space open to all. This chapter also discussed the ways vending politics are challenging racialized, anti-immigrant urban politics, asserting an understanding of urban social relations which are built not on differentiation and exclusion, but on solidarity and inclusion. Although there are conflicts within the movement, including issues around race and racialization, many vendors, organizers, and activists are consistently working to challenge and resist these divisive politics, arguing for solidarity across difference built not only on the support of vendors, but on a larger understanding of the shared experience of trying to survive in the neoliberal city.

In this vein, this chapter ends with an exploration of the potential for vending politics to connect with other political movements across various scales, under a shared framework of resisting the exclusionary and eliminatory cities produced under racial capitalism. This includes not only other vending movements, but other social justice movements more generally, including the movement for justice in Palestine and the elimination of the genocidal Israeli state. Vendors, organizers, and activists articulate an understanding of their politics as not only supportive of

other oppressed people, but directly related to their struggles. They consistently recognize their shared experiences under oppressive global racial capitalist forces and therefore understand solidarity across both space and movements as not only important, but integral to any chance of building emancipatory politics. Vendors and their allies are therefore contributing to the building of a transformative and emancipatory politics that transcends both spatial and social difference through a shared understanding of not only shared struggle, but also of the potential to build new urban worlds.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

*Vendors are really like the heart of the city, especially here in LA. You know, everybody likes like the fruit, the fruits, everybody likes tamales. Everybody likes tacos. So it's just like, I think, the heart of the city.*

*Ana, CPC Organizer and former street vendor*

In cities across the world, sidewalks, corners, and streets are alive with people selling everything from fruits and vegetables to cell phone covers and brightly colored clothes. These street vendors travel everyday to these public spaces not only to support themselves and their families, but also to provide their communities with cheap, accessible goods, and overall create vibrant and dynamic urban landscapes. Street vendors have been integral parts of cities for centuries. From costermongers in Victorian London, to female beer brewers in colonial South Africa, to hot dog vendors in New York, street vendors have always played an important role in city imaginaries. However, they have also historically and contemporarily been subject to brutal and violent forms of urban oppression and persecution, including criminalization, dispossession, and overall exclusion from the city. Because they necessarily operate in public space, vendors represent one of the most vulnerable forms of labor, and therefore they are a useful lens through which to analyze the conditions of the urban poor and working class. As cities globally become increasingly more focused on profit, speculation, and financialization, the presence of street vendors challenges the idealized neoliberal futures of planners, developers, and urban elites. Because they require the use of open and accessible public space, street vending raises questions of who has the right to use space in the city, for what reasons, and under what conditions. Everyday in cities across the world, vendors are organizing and building their collective power

and articulating their right to the city. Through this, they are creating the potential for not only a better city for vendors, but a better city for everyone.

In order to investigate the radical and transformative power vendors hold, this dissertation has explored the conditions of everyday life for street vendors in Los Angeles. This includes how street vendors in Los Angeles experience processes of racial capitalism through their everyday interactions with digital technologies, including differentiation, criminalization, and exclusion, and how technologies are used to control and manage life in cities in pursuit of neoliberal urban futures. I have also investigated how they also use the digital to resist these hegemonic paradigms, including crucially their use of digital media and online organizing and activism to counter negative perceptions and framings, combat the violence and harassment enacted upon them by both the public and the state, and advocate for their place in the city. My research adds to a growing body of work on street vending in the global North, especially vendors who operate out of “need,” rather than “desire.” It is therefore also contributing to a larger understanding of not only informality in the North, but the experiences of the urban poor in Western neoliberal cities, including not only how they are marginalized and oppressed, but also how they oppose these dominating processes, and imagine futures that transcend them. It also responds to a call for research on the relationship between digital technologies and street vending, especially its use by poor and working populations in cities in the global North.

This dissertation began with an introductory chapter detailing the history of street vending in Los Angeles, as well as why LA represents a useful location in which to not only study vending, but to study urban life and futures more generally. This was followed by a review of the literature on racial capitalism, including conditions of labor, migration, and informality, urban geography, and digital geographies, and an overview of the methodology I used to conduct

the research. The remaining chapters analyzed my findings and arguments drawn from the field work, looking more specifically at 1) the relationship between vending, vending organizing and activism, and digital technologies; 2) the forms of urban governance that condition the daily lives of vendors; and 3) how vendors are imagining and building new urban futures not only through their work in LA, but also through their connections with other social justice movements across the world.

In chapter four, I investigated the ways in which vendors use digital technologies both in their everyday lives, and in enacting pro-vendor politics. I found that the digital plays an important role in street vending practices, with vendors using digital technologies to facilitate transactions through digital payment systems, conduct administrative tasks like applying for permits, and market and advertise their businesses to not only increase sales, but also to promote the importance of street vending to the city of LA. Through all these actions, I also discovered various ways that vendors are differentiated and conditionally excluded through uneven access and use of the digital, including, for example, the inability of unbanked vendors to use digital payments. I also examined the ways that this differentiation is often co-constitutive with other forms of difference, such as citizenship status. However, this chapter also looked at the ways in which vendors and their allies are combatting this division through the digital, including how they organize and act politically online. Through the use of social media activism, vendors and their allies are able to not only resist the violence that shapes the conditions of their daily lives, but also explicitly articulate their right to live and work in the city, forming vast and deep coalitions around a shared understanding of vendor rights.

In chapter five, I looked more closely at the urban governance practices and policies that condition the daily lives of vendors and create the circumstances against which they organize

online. I analyzed the ways in which vendors are framed as antithetical to the idealized neoliberal city, and thus the negative public perceptions of them that are explicitly produced to marginalize them within the public imagination. This includes an understanding of the intersections between vending and migrant populations, including how vendors are framed as both literally and figuratively “alien” to the city, as well as how they resist these negative connotations by expressing a positive relationship between Latino culture, vending, and life in the US. In addition to the ways in which vendors are negatively characterized, I also looked at other ways vendors are differentiated through urban governance policies, including not only from non-vendors, but from each other. Finally, I analyzed the relationship between vending and urban public space, not only looking at how contestations over public space between vendors and the city represent larger conflicts over urban land use and access, but also how the control of public space, and urban environments more generally, are enforced through policing. This includes a consideration of the relationship between urban violence and safety, and law enforcement—I asked “who really keeps our cities safe?” Vendors are subject to not only substantial violence and harassment, but also both over and under policing, with the latter doing little to address the former. Moreover, vendors themselves play important roles in promoting and ensuring community safety, complicating our understanding of urban violence prevention, undermining the alleged role police play in ensuring safety, and helping us understand the relationship between the city, police, and producing and controlling urban futures.

Finally, chapter six brought together chapters four and five to show vendors use digital technologies to not only resist, but transcend, the differentiated and exclusionary forms of city life produced and maintained by neoliberal urbanism. On street corners and sidewalks in LA everyday, vendors are enacting a politics that imagines a city that is not marked by unevenness

and inequality. They are articulating a right for all city dwellers to access and use public space, framing its value not in its capacity to generate and accumulate capital, but in its ability to provide all people with open and accessible places within which to enjoy the full experiences of urban life. Moreover, they are promoting an understanding of the city as existing for everyone, not just certain types of people compatible with narrow neoliberal urban ideals. This includes not only the poor and working class, but immigrant populations as well. Additionally, this urban imaginary is inclusive of all people who live in cities, transcending not only class difference, but also racial and ethnic difference. It is built on a shared understanding of the urban experience under racial capitalism, and the building of solidarity across difference. Therefore, it also represents a framework within which a larger global movement for the liberation and emancipation from racial capitalism. Through connecting vendor politics with other movements for social justice across the world, vendors and their allies are helping to build a global movement composed of grounded, localized politics organized around a shared understanding of the refusal of racial capitalism, and the desire to create new and different worlds that allow for not only surviving, but thriving.

## **7.1 Contributions to Geography**

This dissertation makes a number of contributions to studies of informal labor, racial capitalism, and digital technologies. Broadly, it adds to the body of work on informal labor and street vending in the global North. Because the informal sector comprises a larger portion of economies in the global South, much of the existing literature on informal work, and street vending more specifically, is drawn from case studies in the global South. In contrast, in the north it has historically been viewed as marginal and secondary to the formal economy, a

survival tactic undertaken by a limited number of poor people. Therefore, my work is responding to a need for grounded case study research of street vending, and informality more generally, in the global North (Recchi, 2021). Moreover, as Devlin (2019) explains, most of the existing literature on informality in the North concerns or attempts to explain informality of desire, including work on gourmet food trucks. In contrast, informality of need, which is typically practiced by the urban poor, is under-theorized in the North (Devlin, 2019). Therefore, my research adds to our understanding of how the urban poor and working class turn to vending out of need, rather than desire. It also allows for an examination of the ways that cities attempt to control the survival activities of poor and working class peoples.

Specifically, although there has been work on street vending in LA, including its relationship with Latino culture and placemaking (López-Garza, 2001; Muñoz, 2008, 2013; Rosales, 2020; Weber, 2001) much of this research was conducted prior to the legalization and formalization of street vending in the city. My work therefore builds on these studies to show the conditions of vending after legalization. It also allows for a unique look at the often contentious formalization process in places like Fontana, as well as including the perspectives of organizers who were involved in the creation, lobbying, and passing of the state bills.

Furthermore, it theorizes informal labor, and street vending more specifically, under a theoretical framework of urban racial capitalism, showing how racial capitalism is manifested and experienced in specific localized urban places. This not only adds to our understanding of the grounded conditions of racial capitalism but also brings a still developing framework into conversation with informality more generally. This is a crucial intervention because of the relationship between the production of racial capitalism and the informal economy—informality not only is generated by processes of accumulation, dispossession, and exclusion necessary for

capitalism, but it also serves to undermine its totalizing pursuits. Racial capitalism attempts to install order and “formality” onto the world to maintain and sustain capital movement and accumulation, and thus its perpetual dominance and control. Therefore, the continued existence of ways of life that resist this formalization, and offer the potential for other ways of being, can serve as pathways to liberation from racial capitalism.

It is also responsive to a call for increased study of the use of digital technologies by street vendors, which is still unexplored. This is especially true of vending out of need in the North, as most of the existing research is focused on either vendors in the South (Casey & Hughes, 2016; Mramba et al., 2014), or on vending of desire, such as the use of social media by gourmet food truck operators (Wessel, 2012; Martin, 2014). My work therefore contributes to an understanding of how vendors in the north use digital technologies within hegemonic neoliberal urban frameworks, showing how they exist in a complex relationship between differentiation and exclusion, and resistance. Moreover, because I focus on global racial capitalism at various scales, this work also adds to a growing body of literature on the relationship between the digital and difference (Jefferson, 2019; Nakamura, 2007; Safransky, 2019), showing how the digital not only reproduces difference, but can also be used to resist the hegemonic domination of racial capitalism.

This research therefore also adds to our understanding within geography of the spatialities and socialities that are produced through grounded engagement with the digital. This includes not only the local, but also the non-local. It develops an understanding of the transnational political geographies that are being produced through localized vending activism as enacted on social media platforms. This joins with other work on social media activism grounded in specific social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street (Juris, 2012). It also adds to the

literature on digital placemaking, showing the complicated relationship between creating a place for oneself and reproducing existing differentiation and exclusions. As Halegoua and Polson (2021) write, digital placemaking as a concept can be applied to a wide variety of diverse cases, including everything from videos produced by refugees and migrants at the Moroccan-Spanish border to selfies taken by South Korean tourists. My research adds to the existing breadth and depth of the work, showing how digital placemaking can be used in explicitly political ways to not only advocate for urban inclusion, but also to create wider political coalitions.

## **7.2 Proposed Areas for Future Study**

There are a number of concepts and themes that I was unable to explore in my dissertation due to time and space limitations that would be fruitful areas for future study. One example is the AVA archive at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research. This archive is incredibly dense and contains so much fascinating material on not only street vending conditions in the 1990s, but also on organizing and activism more generally. Being able to engage with this material was such a privilege, and the stories and histories it contains deserve to be shared and studied. Again, because of the size of the archive, and the direction the project ultimately took, I did not have the ability to include it in this dissertation in a meaningful way, but I hope to return to the material in the future. Moreover, this speaks to a broader area of future study of street vending in LA, which is the temporal connections within LA across street vending. Originally, this project was going to be much more historical, focusing on the specific geohistory of street vending. Therefore, future studies might look at the relationship between contemporary and historic vending in the city to draw connections not only across space, but also time.

Additionally, there is potential for deepening our understanding of the global spatial relations of street vending. As street vending continues to be formalized in southern California, there is the potential to look more closely at specific connections between the movement and movements in other places, especially the global South. One of the cornerstones of postcolonial theory is the upending of traditional flows of knowledge from the North to the South—instead of treating the South as a case study upon which theory developed in the North is imposed, postcolonial theorists argue for the development of theory in the South applied to the North (Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009). Because the majority of street vending activities and research occurs in the South, it is a useful context within which to confront these normative “geographies of theory” (Roy, 2009, p.819). Through applying theory originating in the global South to the North (Shindler, 2014, Devlin, 2018), and showing the connections between southern and northern conditions through comparisons of case studies from both the South and the North (Kern & Mullings, 2013; Shank & Nadar 2013; Vasudevan, 2014), scholars working on street vending can confront the “epistemic violence” identified by Spivak (1988). This not only speaks to pushes to “decolonize the academy” (Tuck & Yang, 2012), but also helps produce what Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986) calls “a liberating perspective,” which allows us “to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe” (p. 87). This perspective is key because of the potential for street vendor politics to engage in a larger global movement for the liberation from racial capitalism composed of localized movements centered on specific social justice issues. In order to resist the divisions and hierarchies that constitute racial capitalism, we must reclaim our relationality, and form networks of solidarity across emancipatory struggles near and far. As always, we can create the world in which we want to live, and so the question remains: “what kind of world can we imagine?”

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