Food trucks are magical urbanism on four wheels.

This intriguing quote from policy analyst and chapter author Mark Vallianatos begins the introduction to Julian Agyeman, Caitlin Matthews and Hannah Sobel’s new edited collection, *Food Trucks, Cultural Identity, and Social Justice*. It suggests the appeal of food trucks, their brightly-painted exteriors, their wide variety of familiar and inventive cuisines, and the experience of standing in line with fellow urbanites, grabbing lunch, and then going off to find a park bench or other outdoor seating area. Through food trucks, eaters can experience the joys of new cultural foods. Often described as the first gourmet food truck operator, Los Angeles chef Roy Choi merged Korean barbecue with tacos to, in his words, “take everything about LA and put it into one bite” (quoted on p.80). Others have followed, serving poke bowls (Hawaiian-style seasoned raw fish over rice), bao (Chinese steamed buns filled with meat and vegetables, sometimes available as mini-tacos) and cochinita pibil (Yucatan-style barbecued pork) in urban landscapes across the country. Obtaining this food gives eaters an opportunity to leave the workplace for the flavors of the street; the pedestrian experience, fresh air, and people watching offer a sense of cultural placemaking. In many cities, food trucks have quickly become a part of urban social life, adding flavor to public events or “popping up” in various shopping districts. Die-hard fans can follow their favorite food truck’s schedules online, while others spontaneously stumble on their presence in public space, blurring the lines between new media foodscapes and everyday social interaction. Food trucks are also a growing force in the industry. According to *The Economist* (2017), the US is home to 4,000 food trucks, and the industry, currently valued at $1.2 billion, is growing at a rate of nearly 8% per year. And despite complaints to the contrary,
the Bureau of Labour Statistics found that counties with more food trucks have also seen growth in their restaurant and catering industries (ibid.).

But what do food trucks mean for cultural identity and social justice? These are the questions the editors of *Food Trucks, Cultural Identity and Social Justice* ask. The book they have produced is a satisfying and ambitious one, investigating the history of this phenomenon, the ways that it has been embraced or challenged by various forms of urban planning and regulation, and its consequences for social and racial justice. Food trucks have become a staple of the so-called creative city, in which urban boosters use a thriving foodscape as a means of place-branding, signaling readiness for large-scale capital development. At the same time, they often have to contend with, and push back against, city regulations on the use of public space. In the regulatory realm, food trucks are often pitted against bricks-and-mortar businesses with higher overhead costs and competing uses of the street such as traffic and parking. Moreover, contemporary food trucks build on the ongoing work of immigrant entrepreneurs, especially Latin American taco trucks, elote stands (selling roasted corn on a stick, often smothered in mayonnaise or crema and spices), and other street food vendors. Not surprisingly, immigrant entrepreneurs rarely garner the cache that has followed creative-class entrepreneurs, and are often treated very differently by city regulatory bodies. In the words of the editors, “there is abundant evidence of differential treatment by local politicians and their enforcement personnel based on whether vendors are perceived as creative-class, hip, entrepreneurial *trucksters* or as illegitimate, immigrant *hucksters*” (p.3). Food trucks offer eaters a new and exciting arena to experiment with taste and cultural foods, and to create new understandings of our individual and cultural identities and our place in the changing city. But at the same time, as the chapters in this volume make clear, they are a vehicle through which many of the same old inequalities are reproduced.

Five overarching and interrelated themes tie the chapters of this book together: regulation, social justice, cultural identity, community development, and postmodernism. The
latter is perhaps the most complex. The editors argue that food trucks embody a sense of “pop-up urbanism” that exemplifies postmodern planning – the demise of large-scale planning models in favor of an emphasis on cultural uniqueness, street-level citizenship, participatory planning, and the mixing of high and low culture. The fusion cuisine of many contemporary food trucks symbolizes a postmodern, performative take on cultural identity as something we do through our everyday practices, including preparing and eating food, in ways that are “complex, dynamic, and embodied” (Agyeman and Erickson 2012: 359). And yet, these agentic, identity-forming processes are shaped and constrained by the broader, racialized urban political economy. Food trucks are often posited as a form of community economic development because they treat cultural culinary knowledge as an asset and the costs of entry are low compared to other businesses. And although there have been myriad controversies around regulation, vendors have responded collectively through democratic, bottom-up actions to claim their rights to the city. Underlying all of these themes is the question of social justice – access to capital, the differential treatment of low-income immigrants versus creative-class entrepreneurs, and the ways that cultural identity must be navigated, performed, and perceived as “authentic”.

The book is divided into two sections: “Democratic vs. Regulatory Practices” and “Spatial-Cultural Practices”. In the former, authors explore the ways that cities respond to this form of pop-up urbanism with either a welcoming or confrontational approach. Some of the chapters posit creative-class food trucks as contesting state power. For example, in Chapter 2, Ginette Wessel draws on three cases in which food truck owners engaged in advocacy to contest proximity bans, restaurant protectionism, and health and safety codes, and argues that they created more just and practical policies. Amy Hanser (Chapter 7) describes how, despite a negative reaction to a previous generation of hippie street vendors, Vancouver responded to popular enthusiasm for food trucks and created policies that encourage their operation. The remainder of the chapters in this section highlight the inequalities between creative-class entrepreneurs and marginalized groups. Chapters 3 (Kathleen Dunn), 4 (Mark Vallianatos) and 5
(Sean Basinski, Matthew Shapiro and Alfonso Morales) each examine the criminalization of immigrant-run “lonchera” trucks in contrast to the treatment of gourmet, creative-class entrepreneurs with Vallianatos offering a particularly notable history of mobile food vending in Los Angeles through the lens of food safety regulations. Similarly, Renia Ehrenfeucht and Ana Croegaert (Chapter 6) argue that policies that facilitate food trucks in New Orleans advantage newer, post-Katrina residents while regulations limit street vending during traditional second line parades and jazz funerals. At play in several of these chapters are incubator organizations that aid immigrants and other marginalized groups in navigating these regulations, but as Phoebe Godfrey (Chapter 8) concludes in her “reflexively local” analysis of her own work, incubators are limited in their ability to counter discriminatory enforcement.

The second section seeks to analyze the “spatial and cultural effects of how, where, and what food is served” (p.13). The first two chapters (Chapters 9 and 10, by Robert Lemon and Edward Whittall respectively) look to individual food truck operators, analyzing the ways that proprietors’ identities allow them to traverse both physical and metaphorical spaces within the urban landscape, constructing new notions of self, culture, and place. The next several chapters return to the previous section’s emphasis on regulatory policy. First, in Chapter 11, Nina Martin compares the regulatory environments surrounding food trucks in Chicago and Durham, North Carolina. The following two chapters, by Alan Nash (Chapter 12) and Lenore Newman and Katherine Newman (Chapter 13) highlight the ways that Canadian city boosters have appropriated and encouraged gourmet food trucks as a part of their efforts to brand themselves as green and healthy, while developing difficult permitting processes that increase barriers to entry. Mackenzie Wood, Jennifer Clark and Emma French’s analysis of Atlanta’s food truck scene (Chapter 14) presents perhaps the strongest condemnation of their social justice potential, arguing that although the featured cuisines are diverse and inventive, ownership remains clustered in the hands of white men. A chapter by Nathan McClintock, Alex Novie and Matthew Gebhardt (Chapter 15) concludes the volume by examining the ways that ethnic minority food
vendors in Portland decide whether and how to incorporate the city’s dominant “gastropolitan eco-habitus” into their traditional and fusion cuisines.

The greatest strength of this book is its use of food trucks as a lens through which to analyze the racialized political economies of changing foodscapes. The historical connections between immigrant food vendors and creative-class entrepreneurs, and their differential treatment by city officials, are resoundingly clear, as are the abilities of non-profit organizations, community development corporations, and vendors themselves to mitigate and resist these disparities. In other words, the volume offers a compelling portrait of the various implications of food trucks for questions of social justice and community development, particularly with regard to the regulatory environment. In contrast, the theme of cultural identity is somewhat undertheorized. Beyond the introduction and conclusion, the term itself only makes two brief appearances in Chapters 4 and 14, and only three of the chapters in the section on social and cultural practices (8, 9 and 15) really foreground the everyday experiences of operators themselves. The editors write in the conclusion that the chapters “fell naturally” into the two sections, but I found the volume’s emphasis on regulation overshadowed larger potential contributions in the realm of cultural identity and agency. I would have liked to know more about the perspectives of vendors themselves, particularly the ways that their culinary choices act as forms of cultural performance and how they anticipate audience responses.

I wonder if this isn’t a problem of (inter)disciplinary specialization. The editors hail from the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University, and the authors are either professors of sociology, geography, planning, and/or urban studies, or activists working in these fields. This is a diverse array, but I wonder if scholars of cultural studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, media studies, and the humanities more generally (some of which also contribute to the growing field of food studies) might have added more emphasis and nuance to the book’s understanding of identity. In their concluding reflections, the editors write that “a direct connection between identity formation and social justice merits further discussion.”
I suspect that crossing additional disciplinary boundaries might be a pathway through which to pursue this encounter.

In addition, there are a number of questions that the book did not touch upon, some of which expand on these questions of cultural identity. For example, how does postmodern planning’s emphasis on cultural uniqueness, of which food trucks are an important example, square with the relative similarity of gourmet food trucks across various cities? How do questions of culinary appropriation affect the practices and reputations of various food trucks? How do food trucks serve as vehicles of culinary diplomacy, creating encounters between various communities? How does the increased proliferation of various communities’ foodways affect their claims of citizenship and their treatment by dominant groups? I also would have liked to hear more from the regulators themselves about why they have taken varying approaches to food trucks (both within and between cities) and how they define the interests of their cities. Most of these questions are not specific to food trucks, but food trucks have the potential to illuminate each of them.
References


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