

# Mainstream Flavor: Ethnic Cuisine and Assimilation in the United States

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## Abstract

Assimilation theories posit that cultural change is part and parcel of the assimilation process. That change can register in the symbols and practices that individuals invoke as part of an ethnic experience. But cultural change also includes the degree to which the mainstream takes up those symbols and practices as part of its composite culture. We develop a way to examine whether cuisine, an important component of ethnic culture, is part of the mainstream's composite culture and the contextual factors associated with the presence of ethnic cuisine in the composite culture. We begin with a comparison of 761,444 reviews of Mexican, Italian, Chinese, and American restaurants across the United States from Yelp!, an online customer review platform. We find that reviews of Mexican restaurants mention ethnicity and authenticity much more than reviews of Italian and American restaurants, but less than reviews of Chinese restaurants, suggesting intermediate mainstreaming of Mexican cuisine. We then examine Mexican restaurant reviews in the 82 largest U.S. core-based statistical areas (CBSAs) to uncover the contextual factors associated with Mexican cuisine's local mainstream presence. We find that Mexican food is less defined in ethnic terms in CBSAs with larger and more culturally distinct Mexican populations and at less-expensive restaurants. We argue that regional versions of the composite culture change as ethnic groups come to define a region demographically and culturally.

## Keywords

assimilation, food, immigration, mainstream, culture, Mexican, Italian, Chinese

## Introduction

The cultural imprint of historical immigrant groups on U.S. society is perhaps most obvious when it comes to cuisine. Staples of the American diet—hot dogs, hamburgers, pizza, bagels—were introduced by previous waves of immigrants. But seldom, if ever, do individuals feel any sense that they are participating in an ethnic tradition when they consume these foods; if they do, that participation is largely symbolic (Waters 1990).<sup>1</sup> It can be said that

these cuisines have become part of the U.S. composite, or “the mixed, hybrid character of the ensembles of cultural practices and beliefs that has evolved in the United States since the colonial period” (Alba and Nee 2003:10). That

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composite culture characterizes the “mainstream,” or “that part of the society within which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts on life chances or opportunities” (Alba and Nee 2003:12). The mainstream’s composite culture can evolve through the social and economic inclusion of the ethnic groups that introduced the culture, but this does not necessarily need to be the case. The composite culture can include the absorption of symbols and practices originating with ethnic groups who have been excluded from full entrance into the mainstream. Whatever the reason for the presence of a cultural element like cuisine in the composite culture, its presence there means that invoking it is not intended nor read as a distinctly “ethnic” behavior.

This theorizing about a changing mainstream has as its backdrop the large contemporary wave of immigrants—the post-1965 immigrants—who come overwhelmingly from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. There can be little doubt that these immigrants have changed the American culinary landscape. Across the United States, immigrant-run ethnic restaurants are prominent in historically popular immigrant destinations, such as San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. And as immigrants have moved to new southern and midwestern immigrant gateways, the array of ethnic restaurants has expanded dramatically (Marrow 2011).

Can the consumption of an ethnic cuisine come to be viewed as a symbol and practice so routinely invoked that it comes to be disassociated from its ethnic origins?

We operationalize assimilation theory that explains immigrant groups’ influence on the societies in which they settle (Alba and Nee 2003; Jiménez 2017).<sup>2</sup> We seek to understand how such an important element of an ethnic culture—cuisine—is not necessarily lost as an ethnic practice but comes to be viewed as a symbol and practice so routinely invoked that it comes to be disassociated from its ethnic origins. In doing so, we recognize that the elements of an ethnic culture can enter the mainstream’s composite culture even when the ethnic group that introduced the cultural element remains outside the larger mainstream (see Schachter 2016). We

develop an analytical approach to detect the presence of an aspect of ethnic culture—cuisine—in the mainstream’s composite culture by measuring the *lack* cuisines of ethnic salience in relation to invoking that aspect of culture. We focus on the cuisine linked to a historically colonized group, but one that is more prominently associated with the largest contemporary immigration wave: Mexicans. Drawing upon analysis of customer reviews of restaurants from Yelp!, we examine the extent to which Mexican food has become part of the mainstream’s composite culture relative to other cuisines, as well as the contextual factors associated with that entrance. Using computer-assisted text analysis techniques, we first examine the frequency of reference to the specific ethnic origins of cuisines in the 761,444 reviews of restaurants from select cities classified by Yelp! as Mexican, Chinese, Italian, or American, using American cuisine as a “control” group. We compare how ensconced Mexican cuisine is in the mainstream relative to the three other cuisine genres as measured by the percentage of reviews that mention the ethnic origin of the cuisine.<sup>3</sup> We find that Mexican cuisine is less often seen in ethnic terms than is Chinese food and more often seen on those terms than is Italian food; reviews mentioned all three of these cuisines’ ethnic origins more than American food reviews. However, there is significant location-specific variation in a particular ethnic cuisine’s assimilation, suggesting the presence of multiple mainstreams.

Second, having shown differences between the salience of ethnicity in different kinds of cuisine, we next analyze the contextual factors predicting the presence of Mexican cuisine in a composite culture. This portion of our analysis draws upon 191,140 reviews of Mexican restaurants from 82 core-based statistical areas (CBSAs) across the United States. We use computer-assisted text analysis techniques to uncover the contextual factors associated with the presence of Mexican cuisine in regional versions of the mainstream. All reviews are in English and they do not include the ethnicity of the reviewer. We find that Mexican food is more often a part of the mainstream in regions

with larger Mexican and foreign Hispanic populations compared with newer Mexican immigrant destinations. More generally, locales with large Mexican populations that show a lack of conventional assimilation (measured by English language acquisition) are more likely to have Mexican food as part of the mainstream.

Finally, the status of the restaurant, as indicated by its price range, inflects these findings: the salience of the ethnicity of Mexican food is more pronounced at mid-range rather than at inexpensive restaurants. In sum, we argue that identifying the presence of an ethnic group's culture in the mainstream requires measuring the absence of its ethnic salience. We provide an analytical technique to carry out such an examination. Our findings also lead us to argue that the mainstreaming of ethnic cuisine is regional. Where a particular ethnic group defines a region demographically and culturally, aspects of that group's ethnic culture come to be seen as less ethnic and more a part of a regional version of the mainstream's composite culture.

## The Assimilation of Culture

Culture is central to immigrant assimilation as both an input and an outcome of the process. For culture as an input, scholars have attempted to show how culture shapes socioeconomic outcomes. In one analytical tradition, culture is a set of values inherent to ethnicity that inform aspirations and expectation for socioeconomic success (Chua and Rubinfeld 2014; Lewis 1961; Luthra, Nandi, and Benzeval 2018).<sup>4</sup> In an alternative analytical tradition explaining how culture shapes outcomes, culture is a set of outlooks and orientations rooted in a group's structural position. In this tradition, the human capital selectivity of immigrants compared with both sending and receiving societies shapes the socioeconomic aspirations of immigrants and their children and the strategies they use to realize those aspirations (Feliciano 2005; Lee and Zhou 2015).

Another theoretical position in the assimilation tradition treats culture as a set of ethnically linked symbols and practices, and the form and salience of that culture invoked by individuals

indicates the degree of assimilation. According to this perspective, when, over generations, immigrant groups decline in the frequency and intensity with which they invoke the symbols and practices associated with their ethnic origins (language, religion, holiday traditions, cuisine), assimilation is said to have taken place (Alba 1990; Gordon 1964; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Warner and Srole 1945). This conception treats assimilation as a one-way process in which culture fades from existence as immigrants and their descendants become like a monolithic host society. Moreover, this version of assimilation does not square with the many linguistic, culinary, artistic, and religious contributions that immigrant groups have made to a cultural repertoire that people in the United States widely invoke, regardless of their own ethnic origins.

With that observation in mind, more contemporary accounts of assimilation treat the process as multidirectional, explaining how immigrant groups influence the societies in which they settle. Chief among such accounts oriented toward this perspective is Alba and Nee's (2003) "neo assimilation" theory, which defines assimilation "as the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social difference" (p. 11). According to the theory, across generations, immigrant groups gain upward mobility and come to be seen less often in ethnic terms, resulting in their entrance into the mainstream, or "that part of the society *within* which ethnic and racial origins have that most minor impact on life chances or opportunities" (Alba and Nee 2003:12).<sup>5</sup> As these groups enter the mainstream, elements of a distinctive ethnic culture lose their association with an ethnic origin and become part of the mainstream's composite culture. It may not be that elements of a particular culture have become completely decoupled from an ethnic origin, but rather that they are not primarily recognized as ethnic.

Following Alba and Nee, Jiménez (2017) showed how "established" individuals—those who are three or more generations removed from the immigrant generation—have access to ethnic culture, including cuisine, that immigrant newcomers provide. In relational

assimilation—a back-and-forth exchange of culture and outlooks between immigrant groups and established populations that, over time, changes notions of belonging, including as it applies to culture—regular consumption of ethnic cuisine has become part of the everyday cultural repertoire of established individuals.<sup>6</sup>

These formulations of assimilation represent significant theoretical advances, but scholars have yet to empirically operationalize their core insights, especially as they relate to the cultural influence of immigrants on the mainstream's composite culture. We offer a way to do just that by examining food as a central element of ethnic culture. Food not only nourishes the body, it has symbolic importance. Preparation, knowledge, and consumption of food can distinguish social group insiders from outsiders (Brown and Mussell 1984) by signaling their position in the status hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984; Johnston and Baumann 2007), a sense of self-worth among parents (Fielding-Singh 2017), and ethnic ancestry (Gabaccia 1998). The symbolic importance of food relates to distinctions between ethnic groups—subgroups of individuals who make claims of a distinctive history, ancestry, and culture (Cornell and Hartmann 2006). What makes food “ethnic” is its association with a particular ethnic ancestry (Narayan 1995). But the meaning that individuals assign to food is subject to change.<sup>7</sup> That change is evident in the changing status of food. Cultural omnivorousness, which includes but is not limited to food, is an appreciation of a large variety of cultures and a less snobbish attitude toward cultural products that have traditionally signaled low status (Peterson and Kern 1996; Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2007). The changing meaning of certain cuisines is also evident in their shifting ethnic salience. Food once heavily linked to an ethnic group can lose its ethnic association, becoming part of a national cuisine (Jurafsky 2014). The changing ethnic association of some cuisines is a result of immigrant entrepreneurs finding tweaks in recipes and means of mass producing key ingredients to make an ethnic cuisine available to Americans of all ethnic origins. Ubiquitous fast-food restaurants also make these cuisines

available to consumers with no connection to the ethnic group from which the cuisine originated (Alba and Nee 2003; Gabaccia 1998).

### *Conceptualization of Ethnic Food Assimilation and Empirical Predictions*

Today, recognizably ethnic food, including Mexican cuisine, is in many ways a staple on the palate of Americans' regularly consumed food, in particular younger residents who have grown up in a more heterogeneous United States (Johnston and Baumann 2007).<sup>8</sup> High-status culinary consumption of cuisine is now characterized by an explicit desire for a variety of cuisine that is exotic and authentic, meaning food that is uncorrupted by ingredients or preparation techniques that are perceived to not be from the food's origins (also see Kovács, Carroll, and Lehman 2014). By Alba and Nee's (2003) definition, food seen as exotic by consumers is decidedly outside of the mainstream's composite culture. As Ray (2016) noted, “ethnic” food itself is defined by its *difference* from the dominant white, anglophone culture in America. Our interest is in the degree to which consumers of ethnic food view it as a part of everyday food consumption rather than as a distinctly ethnic cultural experience. Consuming an ethnic cuisine as a widespread practice would place food as an aspect of ethnic culture within the mainstream's composite culture that Alba and Nee describe. We generally posit that the less consumers of an ethnic food describe the cuisine in ethnic terms, the more that cuisine is part of the mainstream's composite culture.

The mainstream may not be uniform across the United States. In a nation as large and diverse as the United States, there is regional variation in the cultural mainstream. The more established an ethnic group is in a particular region, the more the culture associated with that ethnic group becomes part of the cultural mainstream. There is good reason to think that regional variation is important to the mainstreaming of Mexican ethnic culture. The presence of people of Mexican ancestry is a result of both colonization—there were an estimated

50,000–100,000 Mexicans living in the contemporary U.S. Southwest when the United States annexed it from Mexico in 1848—and immigration (Jaffe, Cullen, and Boswell 1980).<sup>9</sup> Many areas of the Southwest have seen a replenishment of a Mexican immigrant population since the early twentieth century (Jiménez 2010).<sup>10</sup> The longevity of the population and continued waves of immigration could make Mexican food part of the Southwest cultural mainstream more so than in other regions. We therefore hypothesize that Mexican food is seen in less explicitly ethnic terms, and is thus part of a regional mainstream, in areas where people of Mexican ancestry are more established (Hypothesis 1). To test this proposition, we draw comparisons between Mexican and other kinds of cuisine. Currently, Mexican, Italian, and Chinese are the top three most popular ethnic foods in the United States (Pilcher 2012:xiii). We compare mentions of the ethnic groups—“Mexican,” “Chinese,” and “Italian”—associated with the type of cuisine reviewed. We also include reviews of restaurants classified as “American” to have a nonethnic restaurant comparison. Reviews come from restaurants in six major U.S. cities.

We compare reviews of Mexican restaurants with Italian restaurants because the Italian experience is a touchstone for studies of assimilation among contemporary immigrant groups (Perlmann 2005). The perceived fitness of Italians to become part of the American mainstream was in serious doubt in the early part of the twentieth century (Alba 1985). However, over generations, Italians displayed significant signs of assimilation, and elements of Italian ethnic culture are now firmly positioned in the American mainstream (Alba 1985; Gabaccia 1998). We examine reviews of Chinese restaurants because, like the Mexican origin population, the Chinese have both a large immigrant population and a significant later-generation population (Tuan 1998). Chinese immigrants initially arrived on American shores during the nineteenth century, mainly to work in gold mining and the railroad industry. However, due to a concerted West Coast anti-Chinese campaign influenced by eugenics, Chinese immigration was halted by the Chinese Exclusion Act of

1882 (Zhou 2010), and the remaining Chinese immigrants retreated to ethnic enclaves. Large-scale Chinese immigration did not resume until after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which allowed for more immigration from Asia. But even by then, foods like chow mein and fried rice were ubiquitous, although they were created by enterprising Chinese chefs to serve to non-Chinese customers. Chinese restaurateurs, in contrast to Italian restaurateurs, had to alter their own cuisine much more to appeal to American palates (Gabaccia 1998).

Unlike the Mexican-origin population, today’s Chinese immigrants tend to be “hyper-selected” (Lee and Zhou 2015)—they are more highly educated than the Chinese population that does not migrate and than the average person in the United States. The degree to which Chinese cuisine has become a de-ethnicized part of the cultural mainstream in comparison with Mexican and Italian cuisine further highlights the extent to which large contemporary immigrant populations influence the cultural mainstream. Finally, we examine “American” cuisine as something of a control case. Indeed, restaurants that fall under the American category are explicitly nonethnic restaurants. To be sure, these restaurants may serve ethnic cuisine, including food with Mexican, Italian, and Chinese origins. But the designation of these restaurants as American provides the basis for us to compare the salience of ethnic origins of food in reviews of ethnic restaurants and of restaurants in an explicitly nonethnic category. Comparing Mexican cuisine with Italian and Chinese cuisines shows in relative terms the degree to which Mexican food is part of the mainstream American palate.

We also expect there to be congruence between indicators of group-level assimilation and the presence of that group’s cuisine in a cultural mainstream. It is often the case that elements of ethnic culture can enter the mainstream’s composite culture without more structural forms of assimilation, like socioeconomic status (Schachter 2016). However, we expect there to be a tendency for the two to be related. We thus hypothesize that group-level assimilation facilitates the entrance of culture into the



mainstream; that variations in the degree to which different kinds of ethnic cuisines are part of the cultural mainstream correspond to the degree to which the ethnic groups to which they are connected exhibit other forms of assimilation, like English language ability (Hypothesis 2).<sup>11</sup> To test this hypothesis, we compare reviews of Mexican restaurants in different geographic areas across the United States, examining the relationship between the salience of ethnicity in reviews of Mexican food and the degree of assimilation among an area's ethnic Mexican population as measured by group-level education and income, immigrant generational status of Mexican residents (first, second, third+), the rate of intermarriage between Mexicans and non-Mexicans, and language use.

## Data and Methods

Examining the presence of Mexican cuisine in the mainstream's composite culture requires data that encompass a large part of the U.S. population and that include a way to decipher whether the population perceives Mexican cuisine as bearing a strong ethnic distinctiveness. We turn to two primary data sources, both from the Yelp! Web site, following other scholars who have used restaurant review platforms to examine food meaning-making (see Gottlieb 2015; Kovács et al. 2014; Ray 2016). The first is the academic data set from the Yelp! Dataset Challenge (2016, hereafter "YDC"), which includes restaurant reviews from six American cities: Las Vegas, NV; Phoenix, AZ; Urbana-Champaign, IL; Madison, WI; Pittsburgh, PA; and Charlotte, NC (YDC 2016). We examine the 761,444 reviews of 10,395 Mexican, Italian, Chinese, and American restaurants in these cities. The second data set, also from Yelp!, focuses only on Mexican cuisine and consists of 191,140 reviews of 3,734 Mexican restaurants located in the 82 largest CBSAs by population in the United States.

To examine the extent of a cuisine's inclusion in the mainstream, we generated themes that we hypothesized would reflect either a cuisine's ethnic salience (and thus its maintenance outside the cultural mainstream, in

which ethnic differences are secondary) or its presence in the mainstream. We generated these themes by reading a random sample of all reviews and selecting words and phrases that could signal assimilation or exclusion of a cuisine, applying traditional markers of assimilation, and belonging to the specific context of restaurants. We investigated the following themes highlighting the salience of ethnicity in a particular cuisine: claims to be an authority on that cuisine, maternal references ("just like my mother's/grandmother's cooking"), exoticism, strangeness, authenticity, spiciness, explicit mentioning of the ethnicity of the cuisine, rank order comparisons within the cuisine, and references to other family members. We also investigated themes that would indicate inclusion in the mainstream: frequency of visits to the restaurant and the level of service.

We quantified the prevalence of these themes within the reviews in the YDC and our Mexican restaurant data set. We generated regular expressions to capture words that describe these themes. For example, for the frequency theme, we searched for the words "often," "always," "week," "day," and "daily" in each review. For the authenticity theme, we searched for words containing "authentic" (e.g., "authentic," "authentically," and "authenticity"), words containing "tradition," and the word "real" (but not words like "really" and "reality"). Appendix A contains a full list of which regular expressions constituted each theme.

These themes resulted in count variables for how many times the theme appeared and indicator theme variables for the presence or absence of the theme. After exploratory analyses of all the themes, we centered our analyses on two themes in particular: ethnicity and authenticity. Ethnicity and authenticity can be tightly linked in cultural appraisal, as is the case with book reviews (Chong 2011). The ethnicity theme represents the salience of a cuisine's ethnicity by measuring explicit references to it, that is, "Mexican" or "Mexico," "American" or "USA," "Italian" or "Italy," and "Chinese" or "China." The authenticity theme captures a concern with a particular cuisine maintaining its original ethnic roots and

thus situates it outside the mainstream. These theme variables constituted the major outcome of interest in analyses. We compared the frequency of these themes between American, Mexican, Chinese, and Italian restaurants in the six U.S. cities included in the YDC.

## YDC

Although the academic data set provided by the YDC spans only six U.S. cities, it contains reviews from many types of restaurants, including American, Chinese, Italian, and Mexican restaurants, allowing for a robust comparison across the four types of restaurant reviews of interest. Our analyses are somewhat limited by the nature of Yelp! restaurant reviews. We do not know the demographic background of those who write Yelp! restaurant reviews, other than that they have facility with the English language. More fundamentally, the insight that restaurant reviews can offer depends on the evaluation of the trustworthiness of the reviewers themselves. Yelp! reviewers are not professional critics and thus lack the connoisseurial credibility that other reviewers have (Blank 2006). On the other hand, Yelp! reviews reflect a wider swath of public evaluations, rather than only the elites,' and thus may be a better gauge of broader entrance of ethnic cuisine into the mainstream's composite culture.

Table 1 shows the distribution of restaurants by category, including the 16,356 restaurants that span multiple categories (e.g., American and Mexican) and all other cuisines. We analyze only restaurants that have a single category type (i.e., only "Mexican" and not "Mexican, Salvadoran"), which includes 400,786 American, 126,772 Italian, 79,176 Chinese, and 154,710 Mexican restaurant reviews.

Table 2 shows key characteristics of reviews in the YDC. The 1,706,816 reviews in these YDC restaurants are fairly similar to those in the scraped data set, which we detail below. They are slightly longer than the scraped reviews, and reviewers give the restaurants the same average number of stars, a reviewer-provided indicator of quality (on a scale from 1 to 5). However, the YDC reviews overall

**Table 1.** YDC Restaurant Review Categories.

Restaurant Category	N
American	400,786
Italian	126,772
Chinese	79,176
Mexican	154,710
Multiple	16,356
Other	929,016

**Table 2.** YDC Review Characteristics.

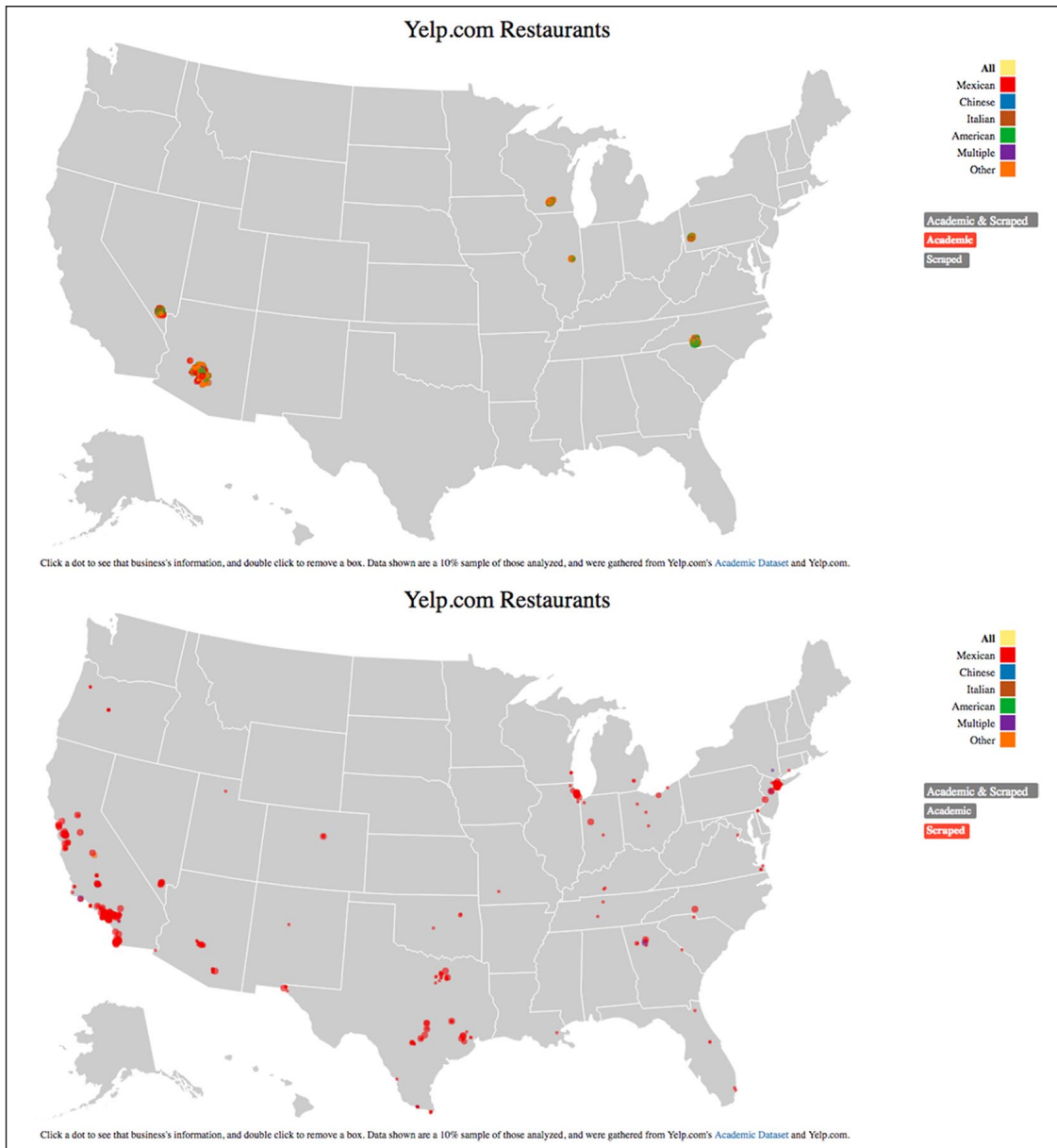
Characteristic	Standard		N
	Mean	deviation	
Word count	112	106	1,706,816
Mentions authenticity	0.07	0.26	1,706,816
Mentions ethnicity	0.12	0.32	1,706,816
Stars	3.8	1.3	1,706,816

mention the authenticity and ethnicity of the restaurants much less frequently. We elaborate on this difference below.

## Scraped Data from Yelp!

Our second data source is Yelp.com. From March 3, 2016 to April 24, 2016, we scraped Yelp.com to obtain reviews of Mexican restaurants across the United States. We sampled the 82 largest CBSAs by population size in the United States (See Appendix B for a list of all CBSAs included in the analyses), using Python to programmatically open a browser and search for the keyword "Mexican" and each ZIP code within each CBSA. We downloaded and parsed the HTML from each restaurant's review pages to obtain the reviews' text and characteristics. This resulted in a data set of 191,140 reviews of 3,734 restaurants in 424 ZIP codes within 82 CBSAs. The restaurants and reviews sampled can be seen in Figure 1, where each dot represents a restaurant.

Tables 3 and 4 describe the scraped data set that we used for most of our analyses. Table 3 describes the 191,140 reviews used to compare the 82 CBSAs described in Table 4. The vast majority of reviews (93 percent) are of



**Figure 1.** Academic Yelp! Dataset Challenge geographic distribution (top) versus scraped Yelp! data geographic distribution (bottom).

**Table 3.** Scraped Review Characteristics.

Characteristic	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Word count	94	87	191,140
Chain	0.07	0.25	191,140
Mentions Mexican	0.27	0.44	191,140
Mentions authenticity	0.11	0.32	191,140
Dollars	1.4	0.5	189,948
Stars	3.8	1.3	191,140



**Table 4.** Scraped CBSA Characteristics.

Characteristic	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Total residents	2,053,575	2,830,753	81
Household income	73,631	16,237	82
Percent Hispanic	22.0	22.1	82
Percent Mexican	17.5	22.1	82
Percent Foreign Hispanic	7.2	6.9	81
Percent speak Spanish and poor English	3.2	6.4	82
Hispanic/white less than high school	3.1	1.2	82

Note. CBSA = core-based statistical area.

non-chain restaurants; 27 percent of reviews mention the word “Mexico” or “Mexican,” and 11 percent mention authenticity. Most reviews are of one dollar sign (\$) or two dollar sign (\$\$) rated restaurants, and the average rating is 3.8 stars. Recent scholarship suggests that, across all kinds of cuisine, reviews of more expensive restaurants contain significantly more references to the authenticity of a cuisine (Kovács et al. 2014:471). However, it is unclear whether Mexican restaurants follow this general pattern of a positive association between price and authenticity.

Table 4 describes the 82 CBSAs analyzed. The CBSAs have an average of 2 million residents living in them, with an average household income of \$73,631. Of residents in these CBSAs, 22 percent are Hispanic and 17.5 percent are Mexican. This is higher than the national average because these CBSAs are the largest in the United States and tend to be highly urbanized and more ethnographically diverse than smaller locales. Most of the Hispanic residents are U.S. born and only a few speak poor English.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Hispanic residents in these CBSAs are three times more likely than white residents to lack a high school degree, but nationally, they are four times more likely. Thus, the Hispanics in these CBSAs have more formal education, relative to whites, than the national comparison.

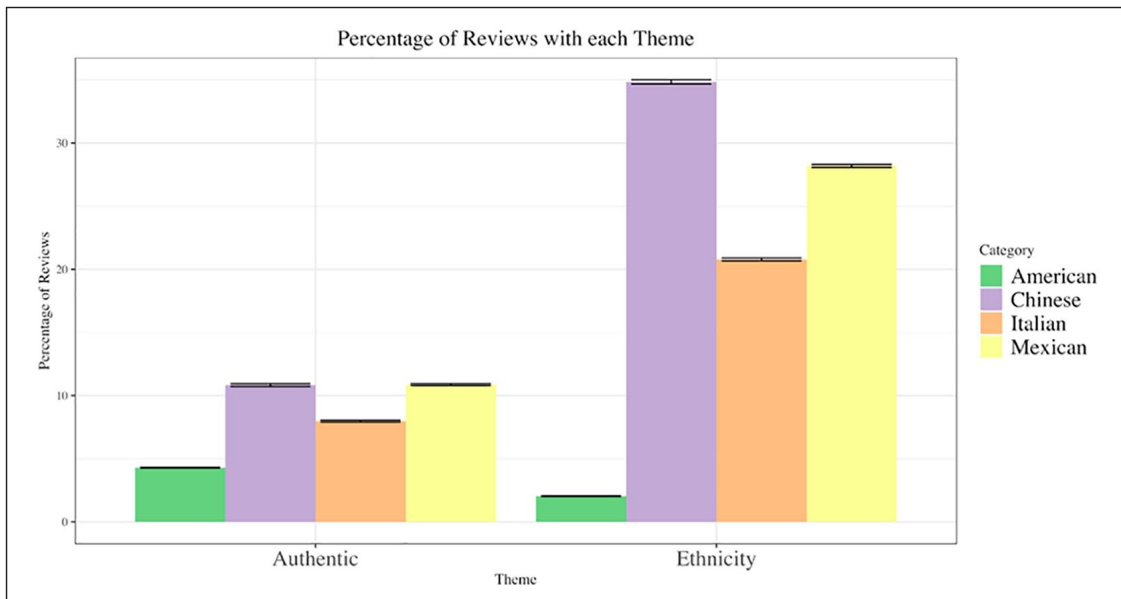
Using the scraped data set, we used ordinary least squares regressions to determine the relationship between the incidence of the ethnicity/authenticity themes and demographic variables about the local Mexican population from the 2014 five-year estimates of the American

Community Survey (ACS), using the CBSA as the unit of analysis ( $N = 82$ ). We expected that as the size of the Mexican population increases in a locality, mentions of the authenticity and ethnicity of Mexican cuisine would decrease. We used the mean number of reviews per restaurant as an alternative measure of Mexican food becoming part of the mainstream as a check on our main findings. Since all the scraped Yelp! reviews are in English and oriented toward an English-language audience, frequency of reviews can be an indicator of popularity, and therefore of mainstreaming. We investigated other structural indicators of assimilation that we thought could reflect the mainstreaming of Mexican food, including the immigrant generational status of Mexican residents (first, second, third+), the rate of intermarriage between Mexicans and non-Mexicans, and the education and income levels of Mexicans relative to non-Mexicans. However, these were not significant predictors of the ethnicity and authenticity themes in Yelp! reviews of Mexican restaurants, suggesting that structural aspects of assimilation may not go hand in hand with cultural aspects, as some accounts of assimilation would predict (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964).

## Findings

### *Location-Specific Variation in Ethnic Cuisine Assimilation*

Turning first to a comparison between reviews of Mexican, Italian, Chinese, and American restaurants in the YDC, we find that the themes



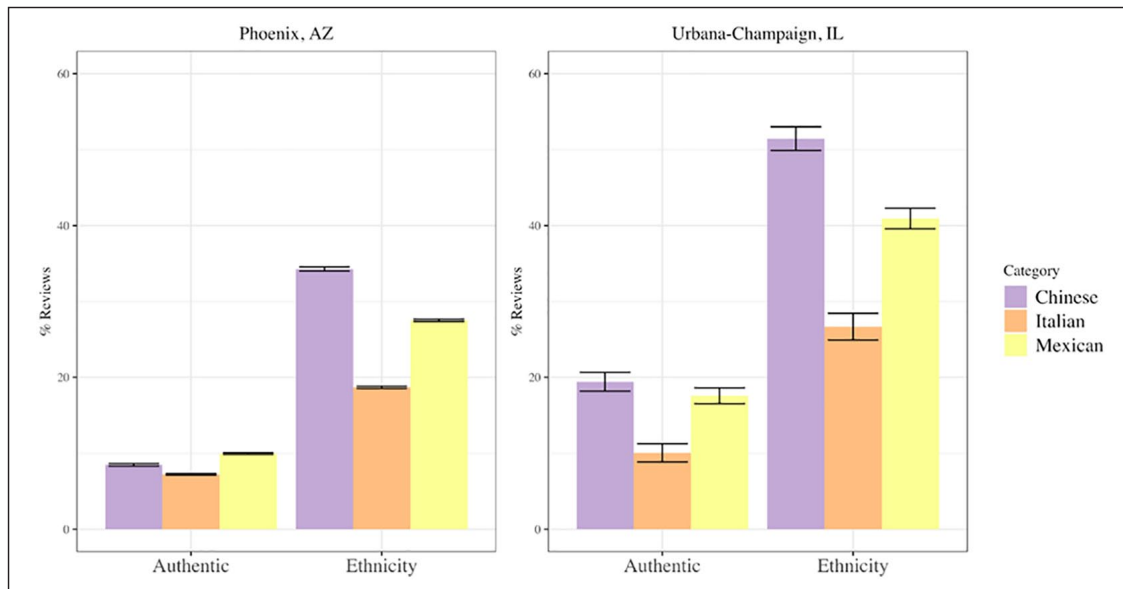
**Figure 2.** Plot of themes for Mexican, Italian, and American restaurants.

Note. Data are from Yelp Academic Challenge, Round 8. Black lines represent standard errors.

of authenticity and explicit mentions of the ethnicity of the restaurant's food are significantly different among the four types of restaurants. Only 4 percent of American restaurant reviews contained mentions of authenticity, whereas 8 percent of Italian and 11 percent of Mexican and Chinese restaurant reviews referenced authenticity (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, the differences in mentions of the ethnicity of the food were even larger: just 2 percent of reviews for American restaurants mentioned the American identity of the food, whereas 21 percent of Italian restaurant reviews, 28 percent of Mexican restaurant reviews, and 35 percent of Chinese restaurant reviews mentioned ethnicity. As we expected, reviews of Italian restaurants mentioned ethnicity and authenticity less often than did reviews of Mexican restaurants, but the fact that reviews of Italian restaurants remained significantly different from reviews of American restaurants reveals that Italian food still retains an ethnic connotation. Meanwhile, reviews of Chinese restaurants mention authenticity with the same frequency as do Mexican restaurant reviews. However, Chinese restaurant reviews mention ethnicity at an even higher rate than do Mexican restaurant reviews, suggesting that Chinese food has a stronger ethnic connotation than Mexican food.

Given that Mexican food seems more similar to Chinese and Italian food than to American food in its ethnic salience, we investigated differences in the authenticity and ethnicity themes of Chinese, Italian, and Mexican food in each of the cities in the YDC. We find significant variation by city in Chinese, Italian, and Mexican restaurant reviews.

Figure 3 shows that, overall, reviews mentioned ethnicity and authenticity significantly more in Urbana-Champaign than in Phoenix. Urbana-Champaign is a relatively new Mexican-immigrant destination in which only 2.6 percent of the residents have Mexican ancestry. Phoenix, on the other hand, is a historical Mexican-immigrant destination where more than a quarter (28 percent) of the population reported Mexican ancestry. Not only are the authenticity mentions higher in Urbana-Champaign across all three kinds of cuisine, but the relative differences between cuisines are larger as well. In Phoenix, reviews of Mexican restaurants mentioned authenticity 10 percent of the time and Italian restaurant reviews mentioned authenticity 7 percent of the time, yielding a ratio of 1.43. That ratio increases to 1.7 in Urbana-Champaign, with 17 percent of Mexican restaurant reviews and 10 percent of Italian restaurant reviews



**Figure 3.** Percentage of reviews mentioning themes in Phoenix, AZ, and Urbana-Champaign, IL. Note. Data are from Yelp Academic Challenge, Round 8. Black lines represent standard errors.

mentioning authenticity. Chinese restaurant reviews in both locations have roughly the same mentions of authenticity as Mexican restaurant reviews. It is important to note that we found the same pattern of reviews with the three types of cuisine in all six cities: Chinese and Mexican food had roughly the same percentage of reviews mentioning authenticity, while fewer Italian restaurant reviews mentioned authenticity. For mentions of ethnicity, Italian food had the lowest percentage, Mexican food reviews were in the middle, and Chinese food reviews had the highest percentage. In sum, we find support for Hypothesis 1: Mexican cuisine appears to be more a part of the mainstream's composite culture than Chinese cuisine and less a part of the composite culture than Italian cuisine in these six cities. But these differences vary with the size and longevity of the local Mexican population. These differences among the six cities suggest important regional variation.

### *The Mainstreaming of Mexican Food in Major U.S. Metro Areas*

We turn to the factors that undergird that regional variation, using demographic data from the ACS to determine whether conventional measures

of assimilation, like language acquisition, of the Mexican-origin and Hispanic populations predict variations in mentions of ethnicity and authenticity in Mexican restaurant reviews by region. Our unit of analysis is the CBSA. We used the scraped data from Yelp! within the 82 largest CBSAs across the United States to test our measure. We divided our sample into nationwide or regional chain restaurants, such as Chipotle, Taco Bell, and Baja Fresh, and non-chain restaurants, like local taquerias. While the proliferation of fast-casual and fast-food Mexican restaurants indicates the commercialization and mass appeal of (a derivative of) Mexican cuisine, chain restaurants are different from independently owned establishments.

Looking only at non-chains, we regressed the percentage of reviews (aggregated at the CBSA level) that mentioned the “Mexican”-ness of the food on the percentage of the population with Mexican ancestry and the percentage of the population who spoke Spanish well but spoke English poorly (we note that while we explored models that predicted mentions of authenticity in reviews, none of the demographic predictors from the ACS data were significant). Coefficients represent the effect of a 1 standard deviation change in the

**Table 5.** Non-Chains' Linear Regression Predicting Percent Reviews Mentioning "Mexican."

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	34.84*** (1.21)	34.84*** (1.19)	34.84*** (1.19)
Percent residents Mexican (log)	-4.09** (1.22)		-1.00 (2.10)
Percent residents speak Spanish and poor English (log)		-4.58*** (1.20)	-3.76 (2.10)
AIC	629.3	626.3	628.0
R <sup>2</sup>	.12	.16	.16
N	82	82	82

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

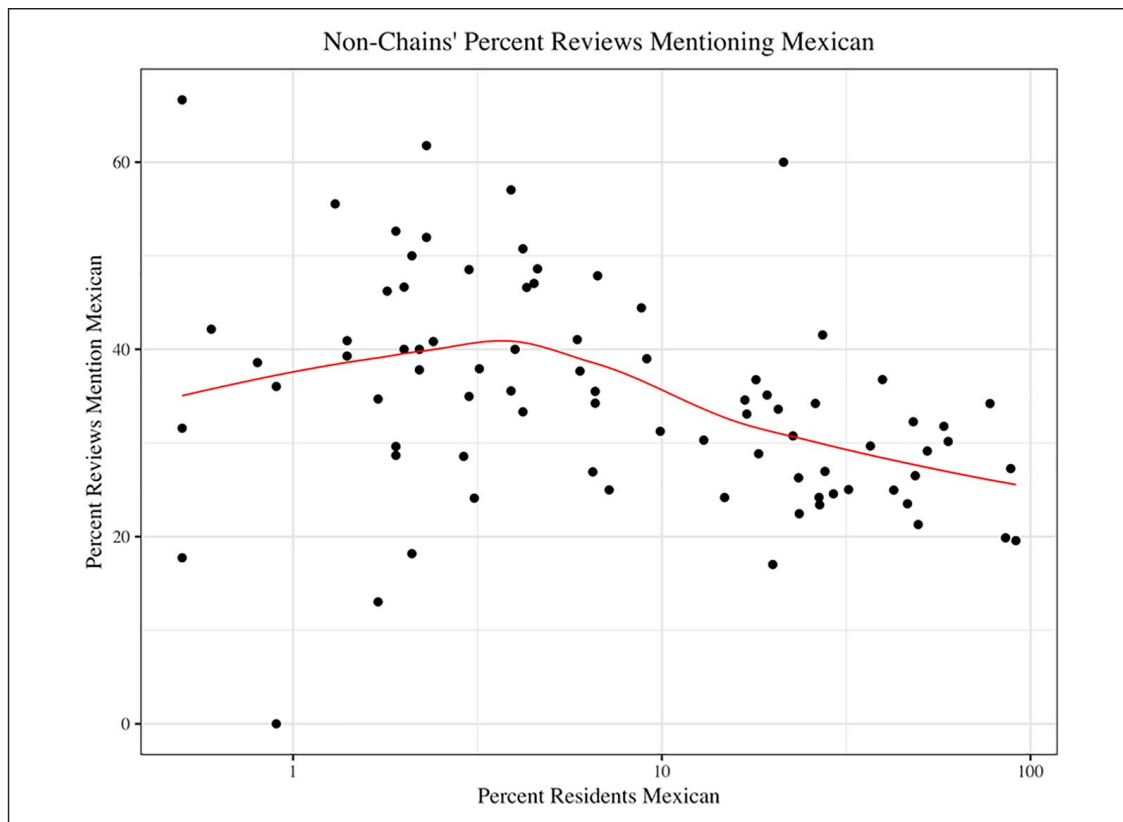
independent variable on the percentage-point change in mentions of Mexican ethnicity in reviews in that CBSA. Model 1 in Table 5 demonstrates that a 1 standard deviation increase in the logged percentage of the CBSA's population that is Mexican predicts a 4-point decrease in the percentage of reviews that mention the ethnicity of the food (also see Figure 4). Similarly, Model 2 shows that a 1 standard deviation increase in the logged percentage of the CBSA who speaks Spanish but speaks English poorly predicts a 4.5-point decrease in the percentage of reviews that mention the food's Mexican-ness. However, including both of these explanatory variables in Model 3 results in a model that still describes the data relatively well (0.16  $R^2$  for Model 2 and Model 3), but both of the coefficients are statistically insignificant. The correlation between these variables is 0.6. Suspecting that collinearity may be the culprit for insignificant coefficients in Model 3, we ran an  $F$ -test to test the model fit between Model 2 and Model 3 and found that they were not significantly different ( $p > 0.05$  [ $F = 0.99$ ,  $df = 79$ ]).

Since Model 2 has a better fit than Model 1 (.16  $R^2$  compared with .12  $R^2$ ), and Model 3 suffers from collinearity, we find that English language ability is the better predictor, rather than simply the percentage of the population with Mexican ancestry. Therefore, CBSAs that have more people who speak English poorly have fewer reviews remarking on the Mexican-ness of the food at Mexican restaurants. A lack of English ability is a rough measure of immigrant generation, since almost all

second-plus-generation immigrants to the United States speak English well (Jiménez 2011). For example, Model 2 predicts that in a CBSA where everyone speaks English well (i.e., 0 percent speak Spanish well and English poorly), about 34 percent of Mexican restaurant reviews will mention the Mexican-ness of the food; if 30 percent (logged: 3.4) of the population speaks English poorly, then the model predicts that only 26 percent of Mexican restaurant reviews will mention the ethnicity of the food.

However, the percentage of the population that is Mexican and the percentage that speaks English poorly in a CBSA *do not* predict mentions of ethnicity in chain restaurants (see Table 6 and Figure 5). So it seems that how the food at Mexican chain restaurants is described is not related to the size or linguistic abilities of the local Mexican population.

As a check on the previous finding regarding the inverse relationship between English language ability and mentions of the Mexican-ness of the food, we also used the number of reviews as an outcome to measure mainstreaming. We calculated the average number of reviews per restaurant within each CBSA and used demographics about the local context as predictors. We find that as the proportion of foreign-born Hispanics increases, the frequency of review writing per restaurant increases (see Figure 6). Table 7 presents the results of multilinear regressions predicting the mean number of reviews per restaurant in each CBSA, logged to obtain a normal distribution. Model 1 uses only the percentage of



**Figure 4.** CBSAs' percentage of non-chain restaurant reviews mentioning Mexican by proportion of region residents self-identifying as Mexican.

Note. Data are scraped from Yelp.com. Each dot represent a CBSA, and the red line is a locally weighted regression fit. CBSAs = core-based statistical areas.

Mexican-origin residents to predict the number of reviews, and while significant, this regression captures little of the data's variation ( $R^2 = .10$ ). Model 2 adds in the foreign-born Hispanic percentage, which renders the Mexican percentage predictor insignificant, suggesting that places with recent Mexican immigration have assimilated Mexican food more. Finally, Model 3 adds English-speaking ability, showing that poor English in the population has a slightly negative effect on the number of reviews, while a 1 unit increase in the logged percentage of foreign Hispanics in a CBSA predicts a 0.45 logged unit increase in the average number of reviews per restaurant in that area. This model also increases the  $R^2$  to .26. In concrete terms, if the foreign-born Hispanic population is 7 percent (the average in our sample), then Model 3 predicts an average of 39 reviews per Mexican restaurant. On the other hand, if the foreign-born

Hispanic population is 15 percent, then the average number of reviews predicted increases to 57, suggesting that Mexican restaurants in these areas are more popular and Mexican food is more ensconced in the regional mainstream's composite culture.

Thus, using both the number of reviews and the mentions of Mexican ethnicity as outcome measures of the presence of Mexican cuisine in a regional mainstream's composite culture, we find partial support for Hypothesis 2: Mexican food is more a part of mainstream cuisine in regions with more established Mexican populations. However, this is especially the case for regions with relatively large immigrant populations and more distinctive boundaries (as indicated by lower English language ability), indicating that the presence of an ethnic food in the composite culture can outpace group-level structural markers of assimilation.

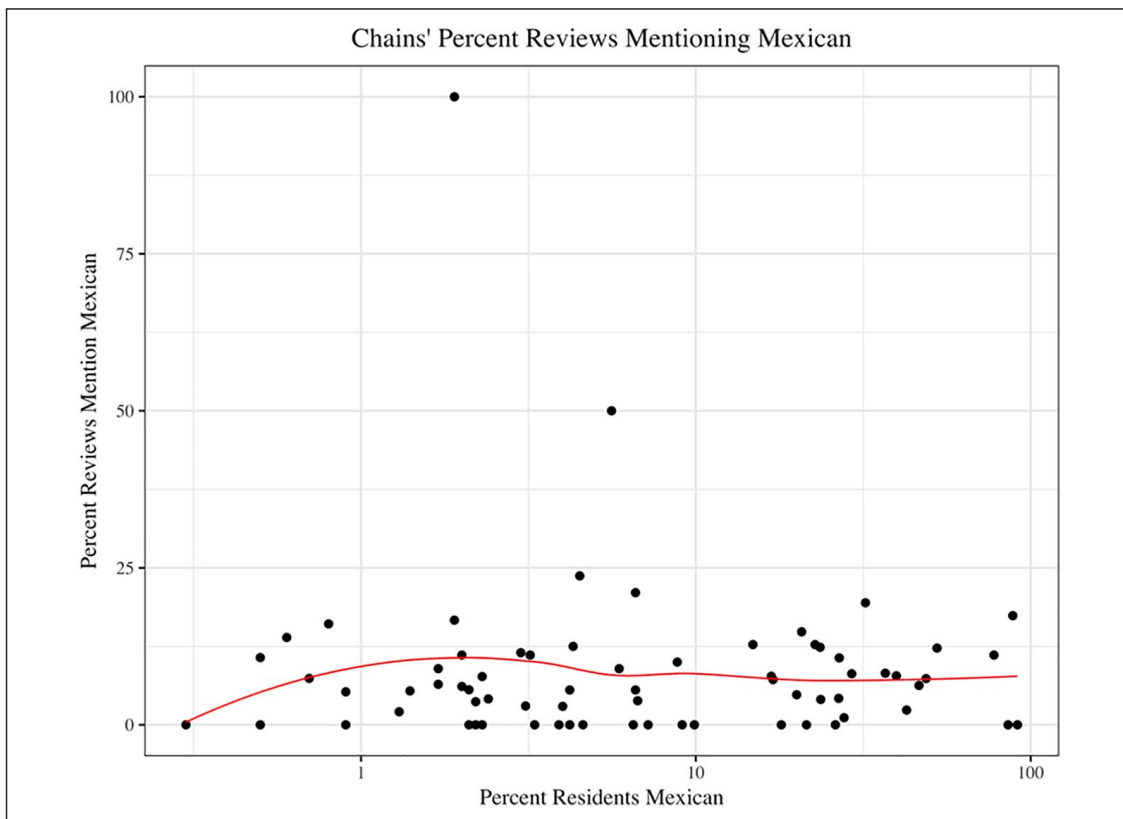


**Table 6.** Chains' Linear Regression Predicting Percent Reviews Mentioning "Mexican."

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	8.36*** (1.62)	8.36*** (1.62)	8.36*** (1.62)
Percent residents Mexican (log)	-0.47 (1.63)		-1.83 (2.84)
Percent residents speak Spanish and poor English (log)		0.17 (1.63)	1.67 (2.84)
AIC	576.3	576.4	578.0
R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.00	.01
N	71	71	71

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

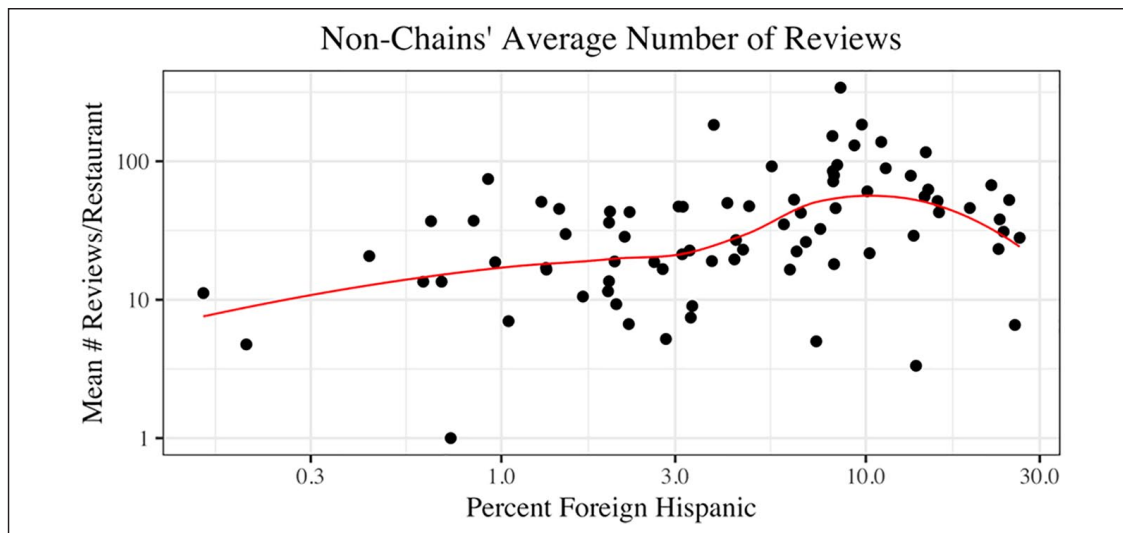
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Figure 5.** CBSAs' percentage of chain restaurant reviews mentioning Mexican by residents Mexican. Note. Data are scraped from Yelp.com. Each dot represents a CBSA, and the red line is a locally weighted regression fit. CBSAs = core-based statistical areas.

Finally, we examined the differences in the percentage of reviews that mentioned the ethnicity or authenticity theme by the price rating of the restaurant. If Mexican food has become part of the mainstream, then we would expect no difference in the mentions of its ethnicity or authenticity by price rating. If, however, a cultural omnivorousness holds, then we would

expect mentions of these themes to increase as the price increased: the most expensive restaurants' reviews should place greater focus on exoticism and authenticity of the food and restaurant experience. Yelp! assigns a restaurant's price on a scale from one dollar sign (\$ = *corresponding to least expensive*) to four dollar signs (\$\$\$\$ = *corresponding to most*



**Figure 6.** CBSAs' mean number of reviews per restaurant by percentage foreign Hispanic.  
*Note.* Data are scraped from Yelp.com. Each dot represent a CBSA, and the red line is a locally weighted regression fit. CBSAs = core-based statistical area.

**Table 7.** Non-Chains' Linear Regression Predicting Mean Number of Reviews per Restaurant (Log).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	2.93*** (0.18)	2.89*** (1.19)	2.79*** (1.19)
Percent residents Mexican (log)	0.22** (0.07)	-0.05 (0.13)	0.01 (0.12)
Percent residents foreign-born Hispanic (log)		0.41** (0.15)	0.45** (0.15)
Percent residents speak Spanish and poor English (squared)		–	-0.002** (0.0005)
$R^2$	.10	.17	.26
$N$	82	82	82

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*expensive*). The vast majority of Mexican restaurants in our sample fell into the one (\$) or two (\$\$) dollar sign categories; there were only 2,084 \$\$\$ restaurant reviews and 144 \$\$\$\$ restaurant reviews out of the 685,340 in our sample. Restaurant reviews mentioned Mexican ethnicity more as the price rating increased, with the exception of the highest-priced, the \$\$\$\$ restaurants. We find that 26 percent of \$ restaurant reviews, 32 percent of \$\$ reviews, and 38.9 percent of \$\$\$ reviews mentioned ethnicity, but only 29.9 percent of \$\$\$\$ reviews did so (see Table 8). Two-sided  $t$  tests find significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) differences between pairwise comparisons of all means.

Meanwhile, the difference was small and statistically insignificant between the price tiers

**Table 8.** Percentage of Scraped Reviews Mentioning Ethnicity or Authenticity by Restaurant Dollars.

Dollars	Mexican	Authenticity	$N$
\$	26.0	11.9	109,778
\$\$	32.0	11.8	65,550
\$\$\$	38.9	9.9	2,084
\$\$\$\$	29.9	6.9	144

*Note.* Two-sided  $t$  tests between \$, \$\$, and \$\$\$ show a significant ( $p < .001$ ) difference between dollars.

for authenticity mentions, as about 12 percent of both \$ and \$\$ reviews mentioned authenticity. Thus, it appears that the Mexican-ness of a restaurant becomes more salient moving from

the cheapest Mexican cuisine to a relatively more expensive variety. Highlighting the Mexican ethnicity might be more important for pricier Mexican restaurant goers who explicitly seek out exotic cuisine as they fashion cultural omnivorous – and thus higher-status – identities. However, the few (144) Mexican restaurants that are in the top echelon of fine dining (\$\$\$\$) elicit reviews that mention ethnicity less often, only a bit above the \$ restaurants. At the peak of haute cuisine, restaurants tend to break from solely offering classic dishes of a particular ethnicity, but rather provide innovative reinterpretations (Ray 2016), which may explain the drop-off.

### Discussion and Conclusion: Multiple Mainstreams

We have developed a way to capture the degree to which an element of ethnic culture—cuisine—is part of the mainstream’s composite culture by measuring the *lack* of ethnic salience associated with the deployment of that element of ethnic culture. Using reviews of Mexican restaurants posted to the online review website Yelp!, we found that reviews of Mexican cuisine more frequently mentioned its ethnicity and authenticity than did reviews of Italian and American cuisines, the latter of which had the fewest mentions of origins or authenticity. However, Mexican food’s ethnicity was mentioned less than Chinese food’s. While this pattern persisted across the United States as a whole, we found significant geographic variations: reviews from locations that have historical and larger Mexican populations, like Phoenix, mentioned the authenticity and ethnicity of Mexican food much less often than did reviews in locales where the Mexican populations were relatively new and smaller, like Urbana-Champaign. This finding suggests the presence of Mexican food in the mainstream’s composite culture depends on the characteristics of the local Mexican population.

Testing this proposition with a larger sample of distinct CBSAs in the United States, we found that an increase in the size of the Mexican population predicts fewer mentions of ethnicity or authenticity in reviews of local

Mexican restaurants, and thus greater presence of Mexican food in a local version of the local composite culture. However, the attributes of the Mexican-origin population prove to be even more important and contradict portions of Hypothesis 2, which predicted that there would be a positive relationship between structural assimilation and the presence of Mexican food in a mainstream’s composite culture. We show that an increase in the share of the population that speaks Spanish well and English poorly predicts fewer ethnic references in the reviews. We also found that there was no relationship between the educational attainment, income level, immigration generational status, or intermarriage rates of a region’s ethnic Mexican population and mentions of authenticity or ethnicity in Mexican restaurant reviews from the region. These structural assimilation measures are not included in the models presented here.

These findings suggest that U.S. regions with larger, *less assimilated* (as indicated by English language ability) Mexican populations are the very places where Mexican food is more a part of the mainstream’s culture. It is likely that in these regions the ethnic Mexican population has a stronger historical and cultural stamp such that Mexican food is regarded by residents as a de-ethnicized and accessible aspect of the region’s culture. The absence of a statistically significant relationship between traditional markers of assimilation—such as education level, intermarriage, and immigrant generational status—and the reviews, combined with the positive relationship between regional language ability and the mainstreaming of Mexican cuisine, suggests that aspects of the mainstream’s composite culture can include aspects of ethnic culture without a concomitant structural form of assimilation. It may thus be that the cultural stamp of the ethnic Mexican population, here in the form of cuisine, is outpacing the entrance of *people* of Mexican origin into the mainstream. There is clear evidence of a persistent exclusion rooted in historical racism and a present-day racial nativism (Higham 1955) that slows the entrance of people of Mexican descent into the mainstream (Telles and Ortiz 2008). Indeed, the ethnic Mexican population can still

experience exclusion from the mainstream, even while aspects of Mexican culture, including cuisine, become part of the mainstream's cultural palate. The same may be true of the ethnic Chinese population, which faced historically rooted and present-day barriers to inclusion in the mainstream, despite a presence in America predating that of many European immigrants, even as their cuisine has become a commonplace in the modern American diet.

Our findings support Schachter's (2016) findings and call to distinguish between symbolic and structural forms of assimilation. As Schachter's research demonstrates, groups already operating in the mainstream are more receptive to the symbolic influence of outsiders than they are to structural impact. That lesson bears out in history as well. Aesthetic, artistic, and culinary influences of minority populations in the United States far outpace the degree to which those populations have access to institutions and positions of power within those institutions. Although there have been significant changes in social and economic opportunities for non-whites over the course of U.S. history, there are also significant asymmetries between the symbolic and structural presence of minorities in the mainstream and its composite culture.

Of course, there may be characteristics of the United States that we cannot capture (by virtue of our studying only a variation *within* the United States) that make these asymmetries possible. The degree of influence of an ethnic culture, including cuisine, to become part of a cultural mainstream will likely vary according to the dominant model of ethnic belonging. In countries like Canada, where multicultural notions of belonging are inscribed in the national self-understanding, the mainstream's composite culture may be defined by explicit recognition of the ethnic origins of a cuisine and not by the absence of that recognition, as it is in the United States (Bloemraad 2006). Conversely, in countries that narrowly define belonging, like the Persian Gulf countries, ethnic cuisine and the people that it represents may never find the way into the mainstream (Ruhs 2013). But as our findings show, there is within-country variation

marked by region. Indeed, it may make more sense to think of the United States as having multiple regional mainstreams rather than a single mainstream (also see Jiménez 2017). If that is the case—and our evidence suggests that it may be—then the very categories of “Mexican” and “American” food as defined by Yelp! are blurrier than the online review company's organization of restaurant types suggests.

On top of the substantive findings, we have offered an analytical approach for examining when aspects of an ethnic culture enter the mainstream's composite culture. This approach entails detecting when individuals invoke, consume, or evaluate some aspect of an ethnic culture without the ethnic origins of that culture emerging as a salient part of the experience. Of course, there are status variants of a particular cuisine that may correspond to ethnic salience of culinary consumption. There is a population that consumes ethnic cuisine, including Mexican food, precisely because it provides what they perceive to be an unbleached ethnic experience, and that experience is a status signal. Recall that our analysis suggests that ethnicity may be a more explicit feature in reviews of more expensive Mexican restaurants. This finding supports a cultural omnivorousness view of food consumption, wherein higher status consumers prefer to highlight the exoticness of the food they consume in order to differentiate themselves from more plebeian, conventional food choices (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Park 2017). For high-status cultural consumers invested in a variety of culinary experiences, an experience of ethnic cultural difference is the very goal of food consumption. And the few Mexican restaurants that have edged into the fine-dining elite normally associated with French, Italian, Spanish, or Japanese cuisine (Ray 2016) emphasize the authenticity and ethnicity of Mexican food in order to appeal to cultural omnivores. Returning to our data, for the relatively very small group of Mexican restaurants in our sample that fell into the highest-price bracket (144), Mexican-ness was less salient, suggesting that Mexican food may be making headway into the realm of fine dining on top of its place among more “everyday”

cuisine, further indicating its presence in aspects of the composite culture invoked across a class spectrum.

Mexican food, like Italian food before it (Ray 2016), may be at a tipping point when the ethnicity of Mexican food becomes secondary. Historically, Italian food may have been structurally better placed to enter into the culinary mainstream: from the late nineteenth century through World War II, Italian immigrants' cuisine was accepted into the more refined restaurant setting in New York City, while Mexican cuisine was relegated to outdoor street vendors—for example, “chili queens”—in Texas (Gabaccia and Pilcher 2011). Today, Italian foods like pasta and pizza are on the menu not only at Italian restaurants but at “American” restaurants as well. Similarly, many non-Mexican restaurants feature Mexican cuisine of some sort on their menus.

But even if Mexican food continues to enter the mainstream's composite culture, there may not be a proportional entrance of people of Mexican ancestry into the mainstream itself. As we show, Italian food appears more firmly positioned in the mainstream's composite culture, but Chinese food appears less so. The position of the culinary aspect of Italian culture happened alongside the entrance of people of Italian ancestry into the mainstream, a move that was partly ushered in by Italians positioning themselves, often against non-whites, to claim full whiteness (Guglielmo and Salerno 2003). Although some individuals of Mexican descent operate in the mainstream, there is not a wholesale recognition of Mexican-ness as compatible with the mainstream. Instead, the prevailing notion of Mexicans as racial and legal outsiders persists (Flores and Schachter 2018). That positioning of people of Mexican descent, alongside our findings, suggests that elements of Mexican culture in the mainstream's composite culture outpace the presence of ethnic Mexicans in the mainstream.

## Appendix A

Note: All of the following are not case sensitive, except for the “American” item, which

is restricted to “US” so as to exclude “us” mentions

“strange”: “strange|weird|foreign”  
 “authentic”: “authentic|tradition|real(\\b|\$)”  
 “ranking”: “best|worst|average”  
 “frequency”: “often|always|week|day|daily”  
 “authority”: “expert|connoisseur|aholic”  
 “partner”: “girlfriend|boyfriend|(\\b|gf\\b)|(\\b|bf\\b)”  
 “family”: “girlfriend|boyfriend|(\\b|gf\\b)|(\\b|bf\\b)|wife|husband|hubby|mom|dad|mother|father|son|daughter|kids|partner”  
 “service”: “staff|employee|service”  
 “spicy”: “spicy|spice|hot”  
 “exotic”: “exotic|adventur|rare”  
 “maternal”: “mom|mother|grandma|grandmother|nana|nonna|abuela|abuelita|nonnie|nona|nana”  
 “mexican”: “mexican|mexico”  
 “italian”: “italian|italy”  
 “American”: “(A|a)merica|\\bUSA\\b|\\bUS\\b|(U|u)nited (S|s)tates”

## Appendix B

### *CBSAs Sampled in Scraped Data Set*

Albuquerque, NM  
 Ann Arbor, MI  
 Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, GA  
 Augusta-Richmond County, GA-SC  
 Austin-Round Rock, TX  
 Bakersfield, CA  
 Baltimore-Columbia-Towson, MD  
 Bend-Redmond, OR  
 Blacksburg-Christiansburg-Radford, VA  
 Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH  
 Bowling Green, KY  
 Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk, CT  
 Brownsville-Harlingen, TX  
 Bucyrus, OH Micro Area  
 Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Niagara Falls, NY  
 Charleston-North Charleston, SC  
 Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC  
 Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI  
 Chillicothe, OH Micro Area  
 Cincinnati, OH-KY-IN  
 Clarksville, TN-KY



Cleveland-Elyria, OH  
 College Station-Bryan, TX  
 Columbia, MO  
 Columbus, OH  
 Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX  
 Dalton, GA  
 Denver-Aurora-Lakewood, CO  
 Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI  
 El Paso, TX  
 Fayetteville, NC  
 Findlay, OH Micro Area  
 Fresno, CA  
 Greenville, NC  
 Hanford-Corcoran, CA  
 Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford, CT  
 Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton, NC  
 Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX  
 Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson, IN  
 Ithaca, NY  
 Jacksonville, FL  
 Jonesboro, AR  
 Kansas City, MO-KS  
 Kennewick-Richland, WA  
 Laredo, TX  
 Las Vegas-Henderson-Paradise, NV  
 McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX  
 Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL  
 Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI  
 Modesto, CA  
 Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro-Franklin, TN  
 New Haven-Milford, CT  
 New Orleans-Metairie, LA  
 New York City-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ  
 Ogden-Clearfield, UT  
 Oklahoma City, OK  
 Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford, FL  
 Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura, CA  
 Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD  
 Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ  
 Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA  
 Raleigh, NC  
 Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA  
 Sacramento-Roseville-Arden-Arcade, CA  
 St. Louis, MO-IL  
 Salem, OR  
 Salinas, CA

Salt Lake City, UT  
 San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX  
 San Diego-Carlsbad, CA  
 San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA  
 San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA  
 San Luis Obispo-Paso Robles-Arroyo Grande, CA  
 Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA  
 Springfield, MO  
 Tucson, AZ  
 Tulsa, OK  
 Vallejo-Fairfield, CA  
 Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC  
 Visalia-Porterville, CA  
 Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV  
 Yuma, AZ


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### Notes

1. Even so, immigrants have predominated in the restaurant and food service industry, especially in traditional immigrant gateways such as New York City, where immigrants have always constituted the majority of restaurant owners dating back to before the Civil War (Ray 2016). Whereas the immigrant restaurateurs, bakers, and butchers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were German, Irish, and Italian, today's purveyors of "ethnic" cuisine are Mexican, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Central American.
2. See Alba and Nee (2003) for an in-depth discussion of the history of the theory.
3. Historically, journalists and restaurant critics have ascribed Mexican and Chinese food to a

lower place in the status hierarchy compared with Italian and American food (Ray 2016). Given this elite discourse on status, we turn our attention to the relative assimilation of these cuisines.

4. See Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010) for a discussion and critique of this “culture of poverty” argument.
5. This notion of assimilation is contested. Several works make the case that assimilation for some groups, like Mexicans, is hardly inevitable, as people of Mexican ancestry remain a racialized group in the United States. See, for example, Telles and Ortiz (2008).
6. Vasquez-Tokos’ (2017) research on intermarriage as a pathway through which minority groups influence the identities of majority groups is another example of empirical work showing that assimilation can be a relational process.
7. The status associated with food is also subject to change. Some foods that were once seen as low status because of their consumption by low-status individuals are now central to high-status, culturally omnivorous food consumption (e.g., lobster in the 1800s was seen as a “sea-insect,” fit only for prisoners; see Johnston and Baumann 2007; Wallace 2004).
8. Johnston and Baumann (2009) noted, “90% of adults between 25 and 34 reported having prepared ethnic food at home in the past month compared with 68% of those 65+” (p. 24).
9. For a fuller account of the history of colonization, see Gómez-Quíñones (1994).
10. Mexican immigration has been net negative since the Great Recession, but a large population of Mexican immigrants still resides in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center 2015).
11. The entrance of an ethnic group into the mainstream results principally from upward socioeconomic mobility and declining social isolation (neighborhood segregation, intermarriage, etc.). That process generally unfolds over generations. The degree to which people of Mexican ancestry multiple generations removed from an immigrant point of origin have achieved that mobility is very much open to debate (Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow 2014; Duncan and Trejo 2016; Jiménez 2010; Telles and Ortiz 2008).
12. Note that we use statistics on the entire Hispanic population rather than Mexican population due to data limitations resulting from

using CBSAs, which are too small for public use microdata on foreign-born Mexican heritage residents as the unit of analysis.

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