

Reimagining; Community Liquor Stores  
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I step out of the apartments I grew up in Pico-Union, skate through the alley and take a left for less than half a block to see if anyone is standing in front of my local liquor mart. Sometimes folks are posted at the bus stop next to the store or out-front chopping it up, or maybe shooting Dice. Whether stopping by to socialize or imbibe, the neighborhood liquor mart or 'bodega' is a 'hub,' the place to consume and mingle in urban Los Angeles. Now in the face of COVID-19, our need for bodega/liquor stores as local sources of fresh foods becomes even more essential. Yet, while the neighborhood store might be the logical place to home in on community needs and defense against a global pandemic, too often management disregards the health and well-being of the community they serve. Some store owners show up as pillars in the community going above and beyond, while others show little care, oftentimes marking up products and disregarding masking and distancing regulations. The corner store can be a place of additional assistance or increased risk.

My humble neighborhood of Pico-Union in Los Angeles is a part of a corridor leading up to Mid-city as well as West Los Angeles. It is home to roughly 41,846 people<sup>1</sup>, 85% of them being Latinx identifying. Including me, the grandson of two Salvadoran immigrants, Pico-Union has an immigrant population of around 27,000, many from Mexico and El Salvador, and Asian countries left undefined by the data.<sup>2</sup> With 25,352 people per square mile and a household average of 3.3, Pico-Union is a prime example of life in a dense L.A. neighborhood and the issues which can arise in them.

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<sup>1</sup> "Pico - Union Demographics." Pico - Union Population & Demographics, Median Income - Point2 Homes, [www.point2homes.com/US/Neighborhood/CA/Los-Angeles/Pico-Union-Demographics.html](http://www.point2homes.com/US/Neighborhood/CA/Los-Angeles/Pico-Union-Demographics.html)

<sup>2</sup> "Pico-Union." Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, [maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/pico-union/](https://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/pico-union/).

When analyzing communities such as Pico-Union we must understand the food that is being consumed in these areas and the degree to which food affects us. The foods we regularly consume influence our lives greatly; from our physical/mental health, mood, performance in school and the workplace, and even the spaces we occupy. In large amounts, urban communities like Pico-Union are deprived of access to suitable foods and resources to sustain a healthy lifestyle. Here the over-saturation of liquor/convenience stores and fast foods near residences and next to schools makes a less nurturing diet the easiest most attainable option. Seeing as to how 56% of the retail food stores fall under those categories. Which poses this question: What is the role of the neighborhood corner store, and how might a focus on the liquor mart reveal both disadvantage and opportunity for neighborhood districts like Pico Union in the era of a global pandemic? In this paper, I argue that we can provide and promote healthier food systems as an avenue for local autonomy / community engagement while utilizing the corner store as an informational hub for community knowledge.

In a study of three low-income communities' food systems in Los Angeles, one being Pico-Union; there were significant findings surrounding food affordability, accessibility, and availability. Of 1,273 commercial food outlets in these Urban communities, 1,023 of them fall under a supermarket, liquor/convenience/corner store, bar, gas station, sit-down restaurant, fast food, and mobile foods.<sup>3</sup> Half of which equates to Liquor stores/fast food.

As a long time Pico resident, I have always observed high amounts of mobile and pop-up food vendors, like bacon-wrapped hot dog carts, Mexican food trucks/stands, and paleteros (ice-cream pushcart workers). Also, many sit-down restaurants reflect the nationality of Pico's residents i.e. Pupuserias, Panderias, etc. Additionally, all three communities did not have active

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<sup>3</sup> Azuma, Andrea Misako et al. "Food access, availability, and affordability in 3 Los Angeles communities, Project CAFE, 2004-2006." Preventing chronic disease vol. 7,2 (2010): A27.

farmers' markets. Interviewed participants mentioned their nearest full-service grocery store was 1 or more miles away, seeing as to how Smart & Final and Food 4 Less are only 2 large groceries in the neighborhood. Many turn to specialty/ethnic markets with often inflated prices for groceries. In terms of availability of fruits, vegetables, and red meat alternatives half of the 90 surveyed food stores in these L.A. neighborhoods did not have whole wheat bread, brown rice, avocados, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, soy milk, tofu, chicken breasts/legs or turkey. This exposes a large disparity in food access, just a few miles up Pico Blvd where the median income is a bit higher (Mid-City, Palms, Culver City) there are sufficient amounts of healthful establishments like Wholefoods and Tender greens.

The result of the poor allocation of healthful foods and over saturation of liquor stores in Pico-Union ultimately affects the communities' health for the entirety of our lives. The foods provided in Urban convenient stores are consistently high in sugars, fats, and dyes. Walking home from school or down the block youth are more likely to pick up some Little Debbie snack cakes, chips, or soda because that is what is instant, at a low price point, and are often in the most visible areas of liquor stores. In 90 corner/liquor stores surveyed in and around Pico-Union, 85% of stores sold Flaming Hot Cheetos and 89% sold Pepsi, however, only 32% sold carrots and only 17% sold broccoli.<sup>4</sup> High take home tobacco & alcohol sales are often maintained in these same stores, which also have adverse social and health effects on the community. For children, it is easy to develop nutritional issues such as iron deficiency when your diet is maintained through snacks, sodas, and juice. The malnourishment resulting from this negates social/emotional and cognitive development, performance on language-based tests, and the ability to follow

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<sup>4</sup> Azuma, Andrea Misako et al. "Food access, availability, ad affordability in 3 Los Angeles communities, Project CAFE, 2004-2006." Preventing chronic disease vol. 7.2 (2010): A27.

directions.<sup>5</sup> Which is often seen in education as reckless behavior, not fit for current school settings. Then adolescents onward food insecurity may lead to increased chances of depression/suicidal tendencies and adrift from positive parental relationships. Also, attention disorders, hyperactivity, and capability deterrence all result from lack of nutrition leading to changes in school performance in affected communities of color. Then as adults, even after the implementation of an improved diet, we are more likely to have substance abuse disorders and develop chronic illness. We see in low-income communities some of the leading causes of premature death include Coronary heart disease, stroke, homicide, diabetes, and lung cancer. All exacerbated by poor diets, substance abuse, historically harmful policies, and violence however, the causes of these deaths are all tied. As food activist Ladonna Redmond reminds us of with her work, “The public health issue of violence is connected to the public health issue of chronic diet-related issues.”<sup>6</sup> Which is why food and the spaces we gather what we put into our bodies is so important in liberating communities of color.

Alternatives to the status quo of Pico Union’s food system are our way out, whether it be by policy or mutual aid. A single possibility applicable in the Pico-Union neighborhood would be to mimic the Health Retail San Francisco program which incentivized corner/liquor stores in low-income communities with investment and assistance to renovate their stores. The renovations added shelves for fresh fruits and vegetables and limited the amount of space available to advertise alcohol and tobacco products to numerous corner stores in the Tenderloin. After a 12-month evaluation of the first four stores sales data, the policy performed a 35% increase of produce purchases and Three of the stores showed a decrease in tobacco sales by an

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<sup>5</sup> Ke, Janice, and Elizabeth Lee Ford-Jones. “Food insecurity and hunger: A review of the effects on children's health and behaviour.” *Paediatrics & child health* vol. 20,2 (2015): 89-91. doi:10.1093/pch/20.2.89.

<sup>6</sup> Redmond, LeDonna. *Food+Justice=Democracy*, youtube, uploaded by Bioneers, 4 March 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydZfSuz-Hu8>.

average of 35%.<sup>7</sup> If possible to implement a similar program within Pico-Union and surrounding Los Angeles neighborhoods with added assistance in community nutrition education and engagement there would be a large suppression of unhealthy patterns of living that cause numerous life-threatening nutritional issues.

A way to combat some of the unhealthy patterns of living may come from the work of Lauren Baker and the idea of food citizenship as the practice of food-system localization while embodying values of caring for “place”, such as the community, environment and our corner stores. She uses citizenship not in a formal sense relating to political rights/responsibilities but citizenship as participation in space, transplanting knowledge, and cultural identity within the community gardens she references in her work.<sup>8</sup> Similar space-related work is currently being done under Project Pico’s Sana Vida, providing an alternative to the Pico-Union food system. They are a community enrichment center that gives away produce while providing nutritional education and healthy/artistic recreation for all and are the cause for recent soars in Pico-Union produce consumption. Astonishingly, in the face of COVID-19 the organization has turned to delivery and changed from their bi-monthly distribution to 200 families to bi-weekly and reaching 2000 of the cities’ most at-risk families.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, numerous community activists around Los Angeles are setting up community support networks via phone and social media for other forms of mutual aid.

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<sup>7</sup> Minkler, Meredith et al. “Healthy Retail as a Strategy for Improving Food Security and the Built Environment in San Francisco.” *American journal of public health* vol. 109,S2 (2019): S137-S140. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2019.305000.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, Lauren E.. “Tending Cultural Landscapes and Food Citizenship in Toronto's Community Gardens\*.” *Geographical Review* 94 (2004): 305 - 325.

<sup>9</sup> “Pico Union Project Food Distribution” Youtube, Pico Union Project 21 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCjTeb8v9TM> & Image Screen grab from video.

Although I agree with Lauren Baker's idea of food system localization being essential to food justice, attempting to ascend formal notions of citizenship does not exactly work. As an urban context with many non-citizens the term food-citizenship is highly contested, therefore I propose the term food autonomy as a marker of localized equitable systems. On top of availability and affordability within our food system, Baker does not leave out that there needs to be a maintained cultural appropriateness and relatability, otherwise it just seems gentrified and unappealing to the original community. While Baker does a good job of laying out components for a just and equitable food system Ladonna makes similar points and takes the work a step further in her talk "The Color of Sustainability." Here she makes a call for black and communities of color to "Come together to develop a policy analysis and action plans that are reflective of the concerns of communities of color, this will impact the economic, social and environmental needs of our communities."<sup>10</sup> Under this model she hopes communities birth local food sources, which are free of pesticides and additives. The most crucial aspect of her plan which she continues to emphasize is the need for us to sit down together for community prepped meals which include outsiders and officials. In order to maintain communication and a clear understanding of the needs and desires of the present community.

Some would say that the desires of our communities do not matter regardless because under our current economic system we are unable to have a purely just democracy. From its genesis it has been about exploitation, white supremacy and displacement. More recently the mass implementation of liquor stores in Urban communities in America was a component of redlining. Which began in the 1930s as a strategy to invest in suburban America and divest in certain parts of the Urban, specifically Black/Brown neighborhood health and anything

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<sup>10</sup> Redmond, LeDonna, The Color of Sustainability, Youtube, uploaded by Bioneers, 19 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gys3uZVXExg11Kanopy>, [berkeley.kanopy.com/video/race-power-illusion-0](https://berkeley.kanopy.com/video/race-power-illusion-0).

benefiting it (Offering subsidies for developments similar to liquor stores).<sup>11</sup> Additionally redlining characterized whiteness as suburban living, which often did not include daily visits to the corner store, but maybe their wholefoods or fresh n' easy.

Kali Akuno affirms the system we are living under is not a viable path to democracy when they state “Self-determination is unattainable without an economic base, and not just your standard economic base, Meaning a capitalist oriented one, but a democratic one. Self-determination is not possible within the capital social framework, because the endless pursuit of profits that drives this system only empowers private ownership and the individual appropriation of wealth by design.”<sup>12</sup> Self-determination having similar meaning as previously mentioned local autonomy. Furthermore, I agree with Akuno in their beliefs that the only way to cultivate democratic transformation of the economy is through the self-organization of our working class, a new democratic culture and a from below movement to change social structures which define our interactions with the state.

As we transition slowly out of this era of pandemic, let us not fail to realize our normal which we left was unjust but we can return to build towards a new normal which can serve to alleviate the issues already present but only intensified by COVID-19. If we aim to focus on the corner/liquor store, it can be used to combat food insecurity and chronic diseases by providing a new structure/new regulation to strengthen the community, not corporate profits. First, we would hire workers from our community to assist in small redesigns to equip Pico-Union liquor/corner markets to house fresh fruits and vegetables. Similar to that of previously mentioned Healthy

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<sup>11</sup> Kanopy, Berkeley.kanopy.com/video/race-power-illusion-0.

<sup>12</sup> Akuno, Kali, and Ajamu Nangwaya. Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi. , 2017. Print.

retail San Francisco's bodega redesigns (See before & after, HRSF liquor store redesign).<sup>13</sup> Additionally they will include physical community bulletin boards with information on local services, treatments, volunteering/employment, re/developments, town hall meetings, etc. Then allocate community leaders from pre-existing orgs (such as Project Pico) to provide educational workshops on various topics such as nutrition/cooking, community developments, civic engagement, and other community-based opportunities. Additionally, I believe an effort such as this would get ample support from crowd funders such as GoFundMe, seeing as how the rather younger population of P.U. has a dense digital/online community as well. Lastly seeming to be the most difficult for retailers, is the limiting of advertisement and shelf space for tobacco and alcohol sales. As sales for these items are sure to pertain to an extent at least, we hope that store owners have their surrounding community in mind and realize the possible social/physical benefits to come.

My hopes for these changes are affirmed by my archival research I've laid out prior, partially limited by COVID-19, as well the lifelong ethnographic surveying of Pico Union and other Urban communities throughout Urban Los Angeles as a resident. The combination of these three new regulations should serve as a force to suppress and reverse high levels of food related illnesses and dependencies within urban communities similar to Pico Union. All of which are the product of the status quo of the American urban food situation. I believe by revitalizing our communities' local food systems we can further promote local autonomy and community

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<sup>13</sup> 13 Minkler, Meredith et al. "Healthy Retail as a Strategy for Improving Food Security and the Built Environment in San Francisco." *American journal of public health* vol. 109,S2 (2019): S137-S140. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2019.305000.

engagement while using our soon to be renovated liquor/corner stores as informational hubs of community knowledge and empowerment.

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