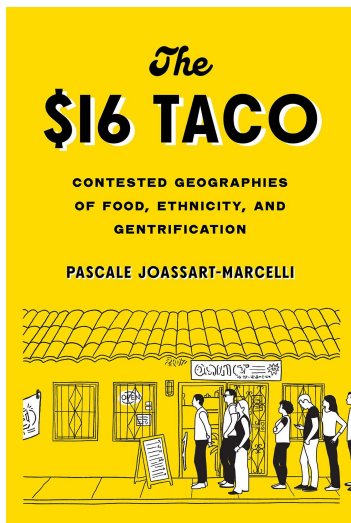




## February 2022 Book Club

### The \$16 Taco: Contested Geographies of Food, Ethnicity, and Gentrification

Pascale Joassart-Marcelli



#### Why Read This Book:

To many, one of the early signs of gentrification is the opening up of a brand-new Starbucks or Whole Foods. In *The \$16 Taco*, Professor Jossart-Marcelli takes a deeper look at how restaurants and other types of food establishments can shape a neighborhood and the relationships of all who live there.

Jossart-Marcelli's work deepens our understanding of how food relates to gentrification, examining how even a taco stand can affect the future of an area. From the food served at food pantries, the performance of a restaurant's front-of-house versus back-of-house workers, to the marketing of food halls and allure of community gardens, these pieces all come together in a complex foodscape that ultimately changes the future of the neighborhood. Jossart-Marcelli is able to seamlessly and eloquently walk through complex ideas of landscape, food, culture, and gentrification in a way that prompted our book club to think critically about the establishments in our own neighborhoods, and what each means for our future.

The book is available for purchase [here](#).

Sign up for future Studio ATAO book club discussions [here](#).

## **Discussion Questions:**

Written by Kariesha Martinez

### Group Exercise:

Imagine that you are a small business owner working in the food industry. You have recently started your own line of cafes, which focuses on unique and trendy ways to display and sell small groceries, snacks, and made-to-order dishes. Thanks to success with your business, you are able to open up another branch in addition to one that you already own – which is located in a higher-income, majority white neighborhood of San Diego.

However, you are looking to open up a store in one of the three regions of San Diego discussed in the book, due to its “up and coming nature and cheap real estate.” Do you make any changes to your store so that it suits the diverse clientele of your neighborhood? How do you ensure that you stay true to your brand, while also catering to the existing residents in this new neighborhood?

### Discussion Prompts:

1. What is your biggest takeaway from the book? Specifically in relation to Jossart-Marcelli’s overarching argument that food is “an *agent* in the transformation of neighborhoods” (pg. 9) as opposed to just a “by-product or a mere symbol of urban change.” Do you agree with this hypothesis? Why or why not?
2. Jossart-Marcelli focuses a lot on how different ethnicities and ethnic food groups change a landscape and neighborhood. What are ways that you’ve seen foods from different ethnicities and races change a landscape?
3. Jossart-Marcelli discusses the ways that the food industry relies a lot on performance and spectacle. As she writes:

“Restaurant labor can be seen as performative, with an important distinction between “frontstage” and “backstage.” Frontstage workers such as waiters, hosts, and bartenders interact directly with consumers, performing emotional labor of serving and pleasing clients. Such body work requires attention to language,

facial expression, dress, skills, and manners and tends to privilege bodies seen as clean and docile.

These are often white workers or ethnic workers that embody reverence, tradition, and authenticity. For instance, in San Diego several restaurants hire Indigenous Mexican women who, dressed in traditional attire, make tortillas by hand on a large wood-fired comal placed prominently in front of the restaurant.

In contrast, backstage performance emphasizes physicality, associated with strong, sweaty, and dirty bodies. These embodied performances translate into a rigid division of labor within the food service sector that is related to race, ethnicity, and gender and affects earnings and working conditions.

For instance, in San Diego this disparity is illustrated by the income gap between bartenders who are mostly white males and earn almost \$14 an hour—a figure that probably does not include tips—and dishwashers, many of whom are undocumented immigrants of color, who earn \$9.50 an hour, below the local minimum wage.” (pg. 117-118)

In what ways have you seen a food experience be changed by the establishment's performance and appearance? Considering aspects like food made at the table, decorations, etc. What do you believe are some larger implications of these “performances?”

4. Throughout the book, Jossart-Marcelli rejects the ideas of food deserts, which she argues does not adequately focus on the *systems* that created these issues and forced people to live through them. Instead, she employs the term “food apartheid” to indicate food deserts are not a human creation but the result of a larger inequitable system at play. Do you agree with this argument? How do you believe terms like food apartheid versus food desert shift perspective and responsibility? Are there other aspects of the food industry where this sort of systems-centered language should be utilized?
5. Food and health often go hand in hand; certain foods are depicted or marketed as “healthy” food versus other types of food, such as fast food. In particular, immigration and culture factor deeply into how families talk about healthy versus

unhealthy food. What are some ways your background and experiences have shaped your own thinking on what you consider as “healthy”?

- a. How do new food establishments present themselves as “good” or “bad” in a neighborhood? How does their existence also affect whether people see a *neighborhood* as “good” or “bad”?
  - b. Would it be better to have a fast food restaurant that is affordable or healthy food that is unattainable? Think McDonald’s versus Whole Foods. What could be some other options?
6. In an effort to help neighborhoods to become more food secure, Jossart-Marcelli not only mentions the more institutionalized means – such as acquiring food stamps and accessing soup kitchens –but also the grassroots ways that communities come together to feed each other in times of need or celebration (e.g., neighborhood potlucks). Taking into consideration our previous conversations about the book *Mutual Aid*, what are some practices you learned about that widened your understanding of mutual aid practices?
7. When it does come to more institutionalized means of aid, Jossart-Marcelli points out how exclusionary help can be:

“While I certainly do not wish to diminish the hard work of volunteers and the value of both public and private assistance programs for thousands of households, I want to point out that they constitute what Carney calls the ‘biopolitical project of food security.’ By doling out assistance to ‘deserving’ citizens, who must jump through numerous hoops to prove their eligibility and receive benefits, these agencies monitor and control hungry people. Immigrants in particular are fearful and reluctant to rely on ‘assistance’ for a variety of reasons linked to this biopolitics.” (pg. 142)

She also points out that controlling what people can eat, or is able to eat, is another powerful part of the food system. What are some additional ways you see power show up in the exchange of food?

More Reading:

- [“Eating the Other”](#) by bell hooks
- [Ethnic Markets and Community Food Security in an Urban “Food Desert”](#) by Pascale Jossart-Marcelli

- [\*Retail Redlining: One of the Most Pervasive Forms of Racism Left in America?\*](#) - Bloomberg
- [\*What Happens When A Brown Chef Cooks White Food\*](#) - GQ
- [\*This Sliding Scale Café Takes Food Access to the Next Level\*](#) - Civil Eats
- [\*The pros and cons of universal basic income\*](#) - University of North Carolina