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Media, Mediation and the Curatorial Value of Professional Anthropologists

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This paper seeks to broaden the discipline of professional anthropology by considering the role of the anthropologist as a curator and a guide for the mediation of cultural symbols, artifacts and products in and among the organizations we work for or with. It employs two case studies of product curation activities, guided by strategic insights shaped in part by a professional cultural anthropologist. The paper builds on prior discussions and insights within the EPIC community to suggest potential new directions for professional anthropologists to pursue, alongside and/or outside of ethnographic research projects.

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On a recent trip to the new "365" Whole Foods Market concept store in the hip Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles, I encountered a different kind of grocery shopping experience. The middle of the store layout was not stocked with row upon row of non-perishable packaged products, as is standard for most traditional American supermarkets, but was instead occupied by perishable hot and cold prepared foods, salads and ready-to-eat meals. This ostensibly speaks to the store's "Millennial" target audience. However, the shopper that I walked the store with, nominally falling in that generational target category, had another matter in mind. She lamented that she couldn't accomplish all of her imagined shopping goals at this store, which was close to her home, because it lacked many of the ingredients she might need if she wanted to cook a meal or bake a dessert. While there were highlights of the store that would make her food life easier, especially for her partner who wanted healthy and fast lunch solutions, we discussed how the store might limit her options for what she could eat and prepare, essentially shaping her daily food habits and her family's approach to food. While much of the press and hype around this new concept store has revolved around its appeal to target audiences and its marketplace competitiveness (Artsy 2016, Baertlein 2016), what is commonly overlooked in examinations of food retail generally is how practices of inclusion, omission and juxtaposition—that is, of the store's product mix curation—can impact, even shape consumers' relationship to food. The store itself, its design, and all of the behind-the-scenes strategic relationships that provide infrastructure for its experience and product offering, mediates this relationship to our food.

Media and mediation are integral to understanding all forms of communication, and cultural forces are always at play in shaping media and in mediation practices. Put differently, there is no such thing as purely objective, natural or untouched communication. As William Mazzarella (2004) explains the medium:

> On one level, whether or not it is apprehended that way by its "users," a medium is a material framework, both enabling and constraining, for a given set of social practices. In this guise a medium is both dynamic and largely taken for granted. However, a medium is also a reflexive and reifying technology. It makes society imaginable and intelligible to itself in the form of external representations.

> Inseparable from the movement of social life and yet removed from it, a medium is thus at once obvious and strange, indispensable and uncanny, intimate and distant.

The processes of presentation and representation, whether through film or in the grocery store, are always contingent upon and shaped by various constraints and culturally-informed discourses.

Typically, when we think of media and mediation today we think about digital formats: internet, social media or television. But the role of social mediation is a much older and broader issue, and can manifest itself in many different forms of communication, including the design of places and experiences. Dominic Boyer (2012) refers to social mediation as, "social transaction in its broadest sense of the movement of images, discourse, persons and things…extensions of human instrumental and semiotic capacities." Boyer further outlines the ways that the conceptual murkiness around mediation has actually led to promising opportunities in anthropology, which are relevant to the work of professional anthropologists (see also Mazzarella 2004, Boyer 2007, Ginsburg 1991). Alongside social mediation, there is another more common definition for mediation, which is actually related: the process of arbitration, resolution and intervention between people or groups in dispute. The two senses of mediation are related conceptually by figures such as the go-between, the middleman or the arbiter. This is a role sometimes occupied by some professional anthropologists today.

This paper will consider two food retail projects the author, a cultural anthropologist, has been involved in, in order to demonstrate the professional anthropologist's potential or occasional role as a social mediator. These are not ethnography-driven project examples. They are cross-disciplinary innovation projects impacted, at least in part, by anthropological insights. By locating anthropologists inside of complex organizational situations and entanglements, the paper builds on the work of others in the EPIC community (e.g. Romain and Griffin (2015), Darrouzet, Wild and Wilkinson (2009), Churchill and Elliott (2009) on "the curatorial eye").

On one hand, I want to consider the ways that consumer-focused mediated forms, food retail environments in particular, are shaped, particularly through practices of curation. In pursuing this path, this paper also seeks to consider the role of design, designers and the design process in the practice of social mediation. While the internet or the book are more commonly considered media forms, we might think about the experience of certain spaces as media or mediated forms, as well. This especially applies to spaces that are carefully curated to present collections of objects, works, historical events and experiences, whether art museums or grocery stores (Murphy 2015). Recognition of this mediation process may also represent a pathway toward organizational change and lead to the reconfiguration of organizational relationships.

Additionally, this paper seeks to broaden the discipline of professional anthropology by considering the potential role of the anthropologist as a social mediator and a potential guide for the mediation of cultural symbols, artifacts and products in the organizations we work for or with. My purpose is not to supplant ethnographic research work, but to widen our professional purview, helping move "beyond the [ethnographic] toolbox" as Jay Hasbrouck (2015) puts it. In addition to guiding organizations to better understanding people and their cultural contexts (Howard and Mortensen 2009), the anthropologist as social mediator can additionally play the role of mediating organizational relationships—that is, how different organizations might reshape or renegotiate their relationships to one another. Often, this

role is not recognized in the organizations where we work, because the mediated qualities of research, representation and/or design outcomes are easily overlooked and represent behind-the-scenes work, quite literally. Through our roles in social mediation processes—influencing curation in food retailers as one case in point—professional anthropologists might find more ways to shift perspectives within organizations, reframe challenges and reorient strategy.

GALLERIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Retailers own a powerful potential role as cultural mediator and curator, and professional anthropology can play a supporting role in shaping mediation strategies for retailers, among others. Working with retailers to develop brand, retail and/or design strategies is one potential pathway where a professional anthropologist—or others with similarly anthropological, ethnographic or, perhaps, para-ethnographic sensibilities (see Powell 2015, Marcus and Holmes 2008)—can play a role in shaping design projects and even entire organizations. As professional anthropologists play a role in mediation—influencing transactions and helping guide the movement of images, discourse, persons and things—one of the powerful ways that we can steer mediation, among others, is through curation.

To curate is to select, organize, and look after the items in a collection or exhibition. The term is most famous in the art world, where since the late 1960s, curators have been transformed from humble custodians into luminary superstars. This is part of a turn towards demystifying the production of art, and placing it in political, economic, social and global contexts (O'Neil 2007). Curators are increasingly recognized for their newfound prominence, while also often criticized for becoming too conspicuous. Debates have emerged around the proper role of the curator, whether a behind-the-scenes scene-maker or a public artist in their own right. The curator's task, much like that of the anthropologist, requires deep readings and thick understandings of dynamic and shifting cultural and historical contexts, in order to produce significant shows that can permanently shape the trajectories of artists, art communities, galleries, museums and art history itself (Obrist 2008).

In this increasingly powerful position, art world curators today are recognized as mediators for collectors and other audiences. They take the vast and seemingly chaotic world of artistic production and organize disparate works into narratives that may tell a story, or alternately may stir debate and challenge audiences.

As Pierre Bourdieu has theorized, regarding the cultural production of artistic value, the value of an artwork is not purely or straightforwardly created by the artist herself. Instead, Bourdieu turns our focus to the larger network of actors and institutions that all have a stake in this, which includes the curator:

> The subject of the production of the artwork—of its value but also of its meaning—is not the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field. Among these are the producers of the work of art, classified as artists…critics…collectors, curators…in short, all those who have ties with art, who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it, and who confront each other in struggles where the imposition of not only a world view but also a vision of the art world is at stake, and who, through these struggles, participate in the production of the value of the artist and of art (Bourdieu 1993: 261).

While curators do not necessarily play the ostensible leading role in the field of cultural production, their role may be considered singularly unique in shaping the art world without ever necessarily calling attention to themselves. Regardless of where anyone stands in this debate over the curator's proper role, it should be recognized that with so much art in the world today, there is a great value in a curator who can isolate certain excellent works, juxtapose works in compelling ways and help us make sense of things.

As a parallel, if the grocery store could be recognized as a curated collection of cultural products, a gallery of everyday life, then product brands are surely the famous artists. And though product brands are most often celebrated and have come to represent how brands work—think Coca-Cola, Folgers, Tide, Mr. Clean, Oreos or Wonder Bread—I want to place product brands in their larger context of the consumer world, including the retail shelf, the supply chain and the retailer, more generally. Doing so highlights the often overlooked role of the retail brand as curator, mediating diverse interests, institutions, histories, traditions, practices and brands.

Food retailers are not neutral access points for food. Rather, they have the capacity to shape or even create ways of living for their customers through, among other things, the products they curate. This practice of curation includes the process of selecting products, excluding some products from the shelf and combining products in space.

One simple and provocative example of the brand as curator is Whole Foods Market, not just in the way this natural and organic supermarket brand sources and brings together unique natural and organic product brands for healthy meal and snack solutions, but also, tellingly, in what they refuse to put on their shelves. In particular, Whole Foods does not sell Diet Coke, even though Whole Foods could generate enormous revenues from Coca-Cola products. The Whole Foods retail brand acts as a curator that filters out the product brand, arguing that Diet Coke does not meet their standard or align with their philosophy. Through curation in this vein, Whole Foods mediates their customers' relationship to the food world, much in the same way that a curator mediates the museum-goer's relationship to the art world. It begins with acts of presentation, emphasis and omission.

Arguably then, the retailer's role as curator and mediator poses a provocative question: In a situation where supply (i.e. the vast and always expanding potential catalog of product brands) outstrips demand (i.e. the limitations of physical retail space or the limitations of time and attention online), could the act of retail curation be considered as valuable as the products themselves? And in particular, might curation that is sensitive to cultural context be of special value? In the past, when retailers failed to carry a product brand, it was considered a liability or a negative value, a failure of trust. Today, when retailers consciously and deliberately exclude a product brand, it may be a core strategy for creating value. Similarly, we can even look to the symbolic and cultural value of curation as equal or perhaps even greater than curation based strictly on financial accounting.

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE CENTER STORE

The center store of the supermarket consists of aisle after aisle of boxed, bagged and packaged products. Often feeling like a warehouse of food, many shoppers perceive the area as highly functional in contrast to the more enticing perimeter food departments, such as produce, meat, bakery and prepared foods. Arguably the most tedious and disliked

experience in the entire shopping experience, center store sales have been relatively stagnant in recent years, industry-wide.

As we walk the center stores in supermarkets around the United States, most if not all offer a so-called "ethnic aisle," which has been around for decades now. An official history is lacking, but some industry reports suggest this grocery store category began not in response to America's long history of immigration and diverse range of cultural traditions, but rather as the "Hispanic aisle," filled with products from Mexico that might appeal to growing audiences of Latino shoppers in the later 20th century (McTaggart 2003, see also Davila 2001). In grocery stores around the United States, there are a variety of different configurations of ethnic aisle—some smaller, some larger, some skewed towards demographic profiles by neighborhood, some guided by culinary trends in food culture. Some are focused on food from Mexico or Latin America, others more focused on food from various Asian countries. Today, the supermarket industry is "evolving" the ethnic aisle, mostly in response to a broadening food culture in America that is more interested in food variety, but also in response to changing demographics. But why are these food categories segregated in the center store in the first place? And is there any value to having an ethnic aisle? Further, if the store is a kind of cultural media, and mediums, as Mazzarella (2004) explained, make "society imaginable and intelligible to itself in the form of external representations," is this an accurate representation of who we are, or aspire to be?

This first case study describes efforts around reshaping category management and product mix strategy in the center store at a medium-sized regional grocery store chain on the west coast of the United States. The project's central focus was not center store initially, but began with a brand strategy and reinvention project. The firm I work with, Shook Kelley, is a strategy and design firm that provided consulting services, and later worked on design projects for the grocery store chain. The main purpose of our initial project work was to create a prototype store design for the entire chain, thereby changing its direction and vision for the future. Facing competitive challenges, a changing food culture landscape and new shopping habits, the brand was trying to figure out a new position in the market, closely tied to the organization's roots. As a west coast company and local brand, the privately-owned company was small and flexible enough to both adapt and react in a sensitive way to changing demographic and cultural diversity trends within the region. This was something the chain had done in the past, but lost sight of during a process of business rationalization and day-to-day operational challenges. Meanwhile, larger food retail competitors sought to develop "neighborhood" strategies but ultimately lacked flexibility for regional variation because they were managed as national brands and had to limit their variation in order to fit into their larger chain organizations.

In the aftermath of the prototype store design and renovating existing stores, one key sub-project initiated by the client involved rethinking center store product mix to reflect a multicultural strategy. In effect, the goal was to deconstruct the "ethnic aisle."

As noted, center store sales have struggled in recent years, while the supermarket industry has sought ways to innovate the experience. Larger format competitors and warehouse stores have picked up ground on these sales, as shoppers opt to purchase bulk versions of these less-perishable packaged goods and dollar stores find ways to offer them at cut rate deals. As a result, fewer shoppers walk these aisles and sales are relatively stagnant.

Meanwhile, much public sentiment has turned against the products sold in the center store. Many health experts, nutritionists and public health advocates specifically suggest not

walking down these aisles, for the sake of our health. Take, for instance, "Rule 12" of Michael Pollan's *Food Rules*, which urges readers to steer clear of center store (Pollan 2009: 27):

> Rule #12: Shop the peripheries of the supermarket and stay out of the middle.
> Most supermarkets are laid out the same way: Processed food products dominate the center aisles of the store, while the cases of mostly fresh food—produce, meat and fish, dairy—line the walls. If you keep to the edges of the store you'll be much more likely to wind up with real food in your shopping cart. This strategy is not foolproof, however, since things like high fructose corn syrup have crept into the dairy case under the cover of flavored yogurts and the like.

But center store is not a strictly functional, rational place for operations and profit-focused organization—at least, not necessarily. Instead, when the center store is seen through the lens of mediation, it can be recognized as a form of cultural communication. Put differently, center store and its product mix might be considered a part of the food retailer's branded experience. From a design perspective, the center store might be organized in a way that prompts or attempts to prompt shoppers to imagine their approach to food in a new manner or perhaps in a manner that better suits their lifestyle.

With thousands of potential products already to choose from, consumer packaged goods companies (CPGs) annually produce a wide variety of different SKUs (stock-keeping units, or different products). Many of these CPGs, such as P&G, reflect the foundational history of contemporary branding. They have created product brands that millions of people know and love. But every food retailer needs to make tough decisions regarding what products to stock, which CPGs to work with and where to place those items on their shelves. Center store is vast, but it nonetheless has physical limitations.

While CPGs carry many famous brands, increasingly, food retailers are developing more robust brands for themselves, partly in order to attract and maintain more loyal followings in a hyper-competitive marketplace. In doing so, the development of the retailer's brand values often results in filtering mechanisms which play an important role in editing product mix. Hence, developing a supermarket retail brand, brand strategy and/or brand tools can have a powerful impact on product curation—even if the result was not intentional or fully thought-through during the strategy development process.

To cite a few current examples, Whole Foods doesn't sell Coca-Cola products, but carries other types of natural soda brands. Trader Joe's isn't selling P&G cleaning products but instead focuses on its own private label product solutions. And you won't find a traditional Nabisco cookie and cracker set at Sprout's. These are some of the more exciting food retailers rapidly expanding throughout North America. They are developing powerful brand presences, and in doing so they are making sourcing decisions that impact customer access to food products in what is perceived in a positive light. Seen as curators, they mediate their consumers' relationship to powerful product brands in a new and potentially valuable manner.

Of course, curation is not only driven by brand values. The omission of products can also be a function of store size and the physical limitations of shelf space. Some stores, like Trader Joe's, are opting for smaller layouts, and that can force the organization to make tough decisions about product selection. Whole Foods' new 365 store features a dramatically reduced center store selection in part because the entire store format has a smaller footprint.

Finally, curation is now potentially being driven by competitive forces within product categories, as food retailers have improved their private label products. Previously considered "generic" substitutes to the "real" products made by big brands, private label has changed dramatically in recent years. Their quality or perceived quality is improving. These private label brands are becoming more respectable. They are now considered legitimate competition to the national brands. And for many retailers, private label products are now a key part of how retail brands build their overall brands.

These are just a few of the important forces shaping curation in the center store. The curation of the center store is not a simple or straightforward profit-driven calculation. In a larger strategic picture, center store curation and editing is about building and growing the overall retail brand.

In this case study, the focus of curation efforts did not require omission of products but instead focused more on rearranging existing products. Products previously featured in the ethnic aisle were dispersed, and integrated instead throughout existing center store categories. For example, sauces of all kinds were brought together, as were rices and other grains.

These changes had an impact on category management. Category management is how grocery operators "design" the layout of the store. Within center store, each aisle represents a category or multiple categories. Categories are not typically organized by the stores themselves, at least not in the traditional grocery store organization, which often lacks the data and labor power to do so. Instead, categories are usually proposed by the "category captain" in each category, the national CPG brand that has a leadership role there. This traditional relationship can vary by retailer and can be adapted to suit the needs of any given retailer. However, the vast majority of traditional format grocery store chains around the United States have the same or a very similar set of categories in their store.

Demographic and census data helped reveal that this retailer's audience, situated on the west coast of the United States, is more diverse in ethnic and racial makeup than much of the rest of the country. On-the-ground food culture research further supported the case that the concept of "ethnic aisle" made much less sense in a cultural context where encountering cultural difference was normalized, whether among people or among food and cuisines. Ethnic aisles can vary greatly in their product mix depending on region, but at what point or in what social context does the concept become obsolete or outdated?

Moreover, "ethnic" is a highly problematic cultural reference that typically suggests non-white and non-American foods, without ever explicitly pointing to what "non-ethnic" might mean. A long and rich legacy of critical studies on identity politics, the creation of whiteness and histories of discrimination and racism in the United States, as well as colonial and post-colonial states, have illuminated how hegemonic discourses shape our perceptions of race and culture. Powerful organizations, including businesses, have played a role in these processes. But must they? While these critical studies were not explicitly raised by the strategy and design team, the project nonetheless raised basic questions about multicultural identities that nearly everyone on the design team and the client team had to confront. The idea to deconstruct the ethnic aisle emerged on the client side, though it was guided by the brand's new strategic direction. In various situations, our consultant team suggested and strongly urged that the brand demonstrate "respect" for the multicultural diversity of the store's audience and potential audience.

As an important side note to this case, even in this project to develop a more "multicultural" brand strategy, while there are certainly promising signs of moving beyond cultural differences and discrimination, there admittedly are also important problems about race and ethnicity that persist. There are new hurdles to confront. The concepts of "multicultural" and "diversity" are problematic, as they run the risk of acting as an apology for legacies of discrimination, without necessarily or adequately confronting those histories (Taylor 1994, Berrey 2015). If seen as a "solution" to problems of racism, the acknowledgment of multiculturalism alone is certainly inadequate. Nonetheless, we hope that the strategy may help steer the traditional grocery store in a better direction.

Alongside the social cause of the brand, which is rarely publicly discussed, the overt purpose of the new brand direction is to reinvigorate a relatively stagnant brand, redefine the shopping experience and create new opportunities for revenue growth. The strategy itself was pointed, but abstract enough for the client organization to draw ideas and innovation efforts on its own. Shelf level implementation happened among other actors and groups, on a category by category basis. For example, I spoke with one wholesale supplier who specialized in international foods in the frozen aisles. He was excited by the opportunity to introduce a range of international products and integrate them into the frozen department. Instead of being placed in the ethnic section of the freezer aisle, frozen lumpia (a spring roll from the Philippines) was placed next to TGI Friday's frozen jalapeno poppers. Further, the client team explained that they were excited by the increasingly broad opportunities to introduce new products into their center store mix.

The new strategy required challenging traditional category approaches, as well as long-standing relationships with CPG partners. For some suppliers, this was a promising development. But other CPGs resisted, suggesting that the client should adhere to traditional category insights.

In the end, improved center store sales justified the new approach for the client. Positive impact on sales growth found in pilot projects was in the range of 5-10% improvement. For a relatively stagnant department, this was immediately recognized as a promising result. Plans were made to roll out the innovation chain-wide.

This case study represents a potential for anthropological insights to inform business practices in a valuable, if indirect manner. By providing input into the strategy-building process and helping articulate the cultural context, anthropology-inspired ideas helped lay the groundwork for how to mediate a set of conflicting or potentially conflicting groups and interests. Here, a new approach to the curation of existing center store products altered the way the retailer communicated the range of products it offered to its shoppers. In recognizing the brand's power to mediate products, new value and business opportunities were revealed.

HEALTHY SNACKS IN A CORNER STORE

While the first case study considered the impact of curating an existing product mix, sometimes the curatorial challenge is how to introduce the new, and mediate potential conflicts with existing customers and partners. Here, we turn to the role professional anthropology might consider in addressing this question, based on another instance where the anthropologist is in a behind-the-scenes position.

This second example comes from a corner store conversion project in South Los Angeles serving a low-income "food desert" community. In addition to redesigning and rebranding the store, a new curation strategy for the store's product mix focused on providing more healthy snacking products for targeted audiences. The branding, strategy and design team consisted of a small group: an experienced retail architect, environmental graphic designer and a cultural anthropologist. This team worked closely with the corner store's owner and several community development organizations that work on food policy, food justice, community finance and urban renewal. The store's operator owned two stores, under different names and in different areas of the urban area. He had a couple decades of experience operating food retail and was quite competent with the business, but struggled to advance and had little access to capital in order to make improvements.

The key strategic outcome and goal of this project was figuring out how to assemble a collection of healthier snacks into a small food retail format, thereby attempting to reshape expectations about the occasion for shopping a corner store.

In similar conversion projects carried out by food justice groups nationwide, retailers struggled to reconfigure their perceived relationship to the product brands traditionally found in corner stores, which contribute to an unhealthy reputation and expectation for these sites. In most of these cases, little was done to rebrand or reframe the retail destination. Conversions would focus on finding space within an existing store for healthy products, especially fresh produce, while the overall retail context did not change or did not change in a dramatic fashion. These conversion projects focused on adding new products, without a complete or comprehensive consideration of how the retail brand might act as a curator and mediator. The fresh produce sections typically felt out of place or distinctly separate from the rest of the corner store, rather than an integral part of the store's business model.

The South Los Angeles store was previously called "$1 Dollar Warehouse," (though neither a dollar store, nor a warehouse store) and is located on a busy urban thoroughfare filled with a mix of small local retailers, fast food restaurants, corner stores and liquor stores. The $1 Warehouse was located in a relatively new strip mall structure, sharing a parking lot with a donut shop, a self-service laundromat and a cell phone store, among other retailers. The building was constructed in 1993, after the prior retail strip mall on the site burned down during the riots of 1992, which originated less than a mile away.

The project began as an initiative of the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) and later, after the CRA was disbanded by the state of California, became a project spearheaded by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC), a non-profit, non-governmental group. These organizations and their partners offered the store's owner and operator an opportunity to participate in a program offering financial assistance if he would sell fresh produce in his store. The storeowner had food retail experience working at 7-Eleven convenience stores and alongside experienced fellow Guatemalan immigrant grocers in Long Beach—and recognized that his business could improve with the help of outside assistance. In addition to enhancing revenues, he also wanted to find ways to better his community and make it healthier.

My role in the project included strategic consulting, branding and creating a team of experienced designers who could help translate retail brand strategy into the built environment in order to rebrand the existing store. I drew from my experience with a strategy and design firm that works with many food retail brands.

We launched the project by spending time in the store and exploring the store's product inventory, competitive marketplace and current customer audience. This was not ethnographic research, though our exploration work sought to situate the store in its cultural and economic contexts. Our main informant in this research was the store owner himself. Despite being located in a "food desert," the local market competition for food represented a challenge, including corner store competitors, other food retailers, and national fast food brands. It seemed that the $1 Warehouse was closely affiliated with the same expectations associated with other corner stores in the area: a destination for unhealthy snacks, junk food and sugary drinks. Customers used the $1 Warehouse as they would any other corner store, stopping by frequently over the course of the week, typically before or after work, buying just two or three products and spending less than five minutes.

The initial expectations for the project from the food policy group were set by prior corner store conversion projects. But our retail strategy team felt that planting a fresh produce department inside this urban corner store didn't make sense. That approach did not seem to fit how people shopped this store, and we expressed concern that the produce would need to be thrown away frequently, thereby exposing the store owner to potential financial risks. Therefore, the new strategic direction we developed hoped to mediate our partners' public policy goals of growing healthy food access in a lower-income neighborhood, with the store owner's goals of improving business and the general "health" of his local community.

A curation strategy for the store instead revolved around snacking, and the brand would attempt to mediate shoppers' relationships to their daily snacking habits. The store would focus on offering healthy—or more specifically, *healthier*—snacking products to the existing customer base, because those people already visited the store frequently and already used the store as a snack resource and destination. While previous corner store conversion projects inserted a generalized fresh produce department into any open space inside of an existing store layout—essentially asking snack shoppers to think about healthy meals and general healthy eating—the redesigned store would focus on *healthier* packaged snacks and fresh produce considered an obvious "snack." For example, bananas could be consumed immediately by a single person without preparation, but zucchini required preparation and would be omitted from the store's produce selection. Further, a wide range of details, including the brand's new name, its graphic identity, product mix and even the store's flow and layout, would all be aligned with the snack-focused brand strategy, at least in theory.

A "Healthy Snacking Zone" was designed in the experience, taking up prominent real estate as the store's first impression. This zone asserted the brand's role as a cultural mediator. Instead of the existing "blank canvas" approach, where the entire retail floor was homogeneous, and therefore neutral or indifferent to external influences, the rebranding process sought to provide structure to the shopping experience.

In asserting its role as a source and advocate for a healthier community by curating healthier snack products, the new strategic direction also mediated the retailer's relationship with powerful global product brands. Once or twice a week, a leading snack product CPG representative would visit the store and directly stock products on the shelf. The representative would often also directly install signage, promotional displays, and even merchandising fixtures into the store. This is not unique to the store, but is a common practice throughout the well-funded CPG industry, called Direct Store Delivery (DSD). In doing so, these CPG representatives have developed long-standing relationships that are

often mutually beneficial to the CPGs and their storeowner partners. These relationships allow the CPGs to play a prominent role in shaping the curation of corner stores.

As a result of the rebrand and the new snacking zone, CPG representatives were limited to stocking products in the rear aisles of the store and promotional signage opportunities were greatly diminished because they did not fit well into the brand's new in-store look and feel. Representatives' initial attempts to stock healthier CPG product options in the prominent Healthy Snacking Zone location were rebuffed. As a result, the store owner may have sacrificed profits from the sale of these top-selling products, which were now less prominently displayed. However, these sales were sacrificed in the service of building the new retail brand's direction.

In comparison to the first case study, the design and strategy team played a more central role in determining the details of this curation strategy and practice, largely due to a lack of organizational infrastructure. Here, my role was highly flexible, and included everything from determining which snack product SKUs might make sense for the Healthy Snacking Zone, to taking trips to a restaurant and corner store supply store in order to source products, and even helping with design decisions and supervising construction implementation. While the strategy behind the rebrand and new retail direction was much looser and less articulated in this case, there was nonetheless an embodied sense of the brand's new direction shared among team members.

The value of anthropological insights in this project rested in drawing connections and opportunities between potentially disparate people, groups, businesses, traditions and institutions. This included store operations, design, food policy, food justice and corner store retail traditions, not to mention navigating city building codes and permits and supply chain concerns. For example, one unexpected outcome of the project was revealing the challenges any South Los Angeles corner store would face in attempting to source healthier snacks for their store. As a result, one of the community partners launched a new enterprise called COMPRA Foods focused specifically on supplying healthy snacks and produce to corner stores in lower-income neighborhoods of the city. The project lived on and expanded beyond the scope of this one store, and continues to grow today. By drawing these ideas together, new community and business opportunities emerged where frustrations had existed previously.

In the months following the corner store's re-opening, financial results were not entirely clear. This was largely a result of imprecise accounting standards before and after the project, a strategic problem that was identified but never fixed. However, the storeowner explained to our team that he was able to pull out of debt. He had hired 3 full-time employees. And for the first time in his adult life, he had the ability to take a vacation trip.

CONCLUSION

It's often said, we are what we eat. Understanding what's eaten, this is the stuff of ethnography, as traditionally defined. But thinking through the lens of mediation, it might be more apt to ask, are we also where we shop? If food retail spaces are not merely access points for food, then they may actively shape us, as sites of cultural production. Understanding how mediation happens and how media gets formed and designed is therefore also a cultural process. The problem of mediation is what Jay Hasbrouck might refer to as one of the "uncomfortable questions" that professional anthropologists can raise

(2015). This is a pathway to provide unique value. By turning the lens of inquiry on the process of mediation itself, professional anthropology might help shift perspectives, reframe challenges and reorient strategy in the organizations we work for and with. Food life is no longer (only) on the outside of the food retail organization, but also implicated or shaped by its own strategy. In essence, we should then be aware of how we, as professional anthropologists, are writing and designing consumer culture (Marcus and Clifford 1986). Professional anthropologists have the opportunity to impact these strategies through our insights.

These case studies hope to explain or at least point to how professional anthropologists might play a role in strategically curating product mixes inside food retail stores. While not applications of ethnographic research or insight, working in a position of cultural mediation makes sense for professional anthropologists, as it builds on our existing set of skills, our attentiveness to cultural contexts and our ability to see connections between disparate organizations, groups of people and discourses.

While professional anthropologists in the EPIC community have debated the role or roles of anthropologists and ethnography within the corporation, this paper tries to articulate a potential ripple effect of our strategic insights. Here, the impact of anthropologically-informed work is followed into other sites of organizational decision-making and strategic relationships (see also Cefkin 2009). Through an understanding of mediation, the EPIC community may discover yet another way anthropologists contribute to the production of cultural and economic value.

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