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**Publication Date**

2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Hidden Economies in Public Spaces:  
A Study of Fruit Vendors in Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Sociology

by

Rocio Rosales

2012

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Hidden Economies in Public Spaces:  
A Study of Fruit Vendors in Los Angeles

by

Rocio Rosales

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Stefan Timmermans, Chair

Los Angeles has one of the most restrictive street vending policies in the country. Despite this, informal street vendors conspicuously and continuously mark the urban landscape. Issues regarding the use of public space and local ordinance enforcement are often complicated by the street vendors' ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as their immigrant status. In the last forty years Los Angeles has seen a surge in the number of immigrant and migrant street vendors. Yet, this phenomenon remains largely unstudied. This dissertation offers an in-depth look at the lives that undocumented migrant fruit vendors lead both on and off the street corners where they work. These vendors sell fruit salads out of pushcarts and can be found under brightly colored umbrellas in nearly every neighborhood of Los Angeles. It draws upon five years of

ethnographic research, participant observation, and interviews with Los Angeles fruit vendors and their families in Mexico. I examine the crafting, strategizing, and deal making that fruit vendors engage in to make a sale, evade officials, and secure a livelihood in a high-risk occupation. I examine how migrant outcomes in the U.S. are tied to families and communities in Mexico. I interview vendors' families in Mexico to assess how life changed for them since their family member's departure and examine the lasting and broken ties between them. The outcomes for this group of undocumented migrant fruit vendors are grim. The main argument of this dissertation is that fruit vendors in Los Angeles lead very precarious lives due to both their undocumented status and their informal work. The prohibition of their presence in the country and as vendors on the street has negatively impacted them. Their lives in the U.S. are structured by limited to no upward mobility; the creation of bounded community and bounded opportunity; the threat and fear of premature voluntary and forced return migration; and strained ties to their sending community.

The dissertation of Rocio Rosales is approved.

Rubén Hernández-León

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2012

*Para mis padres, con amor y gratitud.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Cal Code	California Retail Food Code
CHIRLA	Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DUI	Driving Under the Influence
ERO	Enforcement and Removal Operations
HTA	Hometown Association
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act
LACC	Los Angeles County Code
LAHD	Los Angeles Health Department
LAMC	City of Los Angeles Municipal Code
LAPD	Los Angeles Police Department
MXN	Mexican Peso
S-Comm	Secure Communities Program
USD	U.S. Dollar
VIP	Vehicle Inspection Program

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

David Rakoff once wrote that the process of making art involved the “deeply lonely and unglamorous task of tolerating oneself long enough to push something out.” The same could be said about writing a dissertation. However, I have also inflicted upon others the terrible task of tolerating me during this process—work carried out by family, friends, and faculty mentors to whom I am greatly indebted.

I am grateful to the participants of this study who graciously let me into their homes and lives. They were patient with my endless questions and always made an effort to include me in their work and leisure activities. I hope this dissertation reflects their daily struggle and resourcefulness in a way that makes them proud.

My research was supported by generous grants from the Mellon Mays Foundation, UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty, UCLA Latin American Institute, UCLA Institute of American Cultures through the Chicano Studies Research Center, and the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations. I also gratefully acknowledge the American Philosophical Society and the John and Dora Haynes Foundation for fellowship support through the writing stage.

I thank my committee members Rubén Hernández-León, Roger Waldinger, and Abel Valenzuela for reading drafts of chapters throughout the years and providing opportunities for me to present my work. I am especially grateful to my dissertation chair, Stefan Timmermans, who patiently read countless (and I do mean countless) drafts, met with me weekly, and quickly learned when to use the stick and when to use the carrot. I do not think a student has ever received such an investment of time and energy as I did from my chair (and mentor).

I would like to thank members of the UCLA Ethnography Working Group and the International Migration Seminar for reading and commenting on early chapter drafts.

My friends not only read drafts and listened to my brainstorming but also offered words of encouragement and support. I thank Amada Armenta, Wes Hiers, Leisy Abrego, Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Marisa Gerstein Pineau, Anthony Alvarez, Sylvia Zamora, Araceli Martínez-Olguín, Erika Lamoureaux, Laura Bekes, Barbara Soliz, Vanessa de la Torre, and Pat Garcia. I am thankful to my field research assistant, Juan Carlos Aguirre, for his company and his friendship. Special thanks also to Brooke Minor, whose perfectly timed care package saved me from my late-night-in-the-office hunger pangs. I'd also like to thank my tennis workout buddies—because you asked for the shout-out but also for providing me with laughs and a generous amount of the competitive, fighting spirit.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for being proud of my efforts long before asking when I was going to finish. Thanks to my sister, Vero, who considered me an investment (and perhaps saved me from financial ruin). I hope you start getting those dividend checks soon. My parents did not always understand why so many years of study were necessary to get a good job, but they were supportive throughout. My dad kept my spirits up with his humor. He also kept me grounded—when I was bemoaning a life in Los Angeles without a car he gently asked, “Do the vendors you study have cars?” When I replied that most of them did not, he added, “Don’t you want to understand how they live?” And though my mother initially tried to convince me to sell fruit in El Paso (“You got a degree from Princeton so you could sell fruit on the street?!”), she eventually came around, met some vendors during her visits, and later made me aprons with chest-level pockets big enough to hold my digital recorder so that I could be ready for anything.

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## INTRODUCTION

Four fruit vendors (*fruteros*) working out of large pushcarts line the perimeter of a gas station in the Pico-Union neighborhood of Los Angeles. Two vendors sell on the northern edge of the sidewalk and two sell on the eastern edge, each about 30 feet from the other. The smell of burnt cornhusk wafts through the air from a roasted corn vendor selling across the street to the east of the fruit vendors. Most passersby ignore these vendors as they walk to the metro station, bus stops, and stores in the area. The fruit vendors do not call out to potential customers; instead, they lean back on their pushcarts and watch the people moving past them. Suddenly and without warning police officers and health inspectors descend upon the scene and fan out to cover the entire area. They circle the street vendors, begin asking for permits, issuing citations, and confiscating merchandise. The previously inattentive passersby begin to cluster around the various points of action. They heckle the cops and inspectors and yell, “Why don’t you leave these people alone?” and “You should be arresting drug dealers!” and “Is it a crime to work?!” Some yell obscenities in Spanish but they all keep their distance from the officers. Within a few minutes the police officers and inspectors are gone, rushing away to the next scene and away from the growing discontent. The roasted corn vendor has lost the small pushcart he was using. The fruit vendors now have pushcarts loaded down only with ice; their peeled fruit has been tossed in large black plastic bags and thrown in the waste disposal truck that accompanied the officers. Their colorful umbrellas, knives, and cutting boards have been confiscated. All four vendors are on their cell phones calling other vendors to inform them of the crackdown and to warn them about the lingering threat in the area. A few passersby linger and ask the vendors

what they are going to do and offer their condolences, but most recede into the background and hurry on to their destinations.

What *do* fruit vendors do? The Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) has an unambiguous ordinance prohibiting vending from public sidewalks.<sup>1</sup> Other ordinances in the Los Angeles County Code (LACC)<sup>2</sup> and California Retail Food Code (Cal Code)<sup>3</sup> further prohibit vendors from preparing and selling fruit salads on the street. Fruit vendors operate in violation of codified regulatory and penal ordinances of the city, county, and state. Yet, on any given day of the week, fruit vendors can be found in neighborhoods throughout the city (see Figure 1). Fruit vendors in Los Angeles are largely male Latino migrants, the majority of them undocumented. They have come seeking work and improved economic opportunity but have found themselves barred from the formal workforce. What fruit vendors continuously do—despite prohibition, pursuit, and crackdowns—is attempt to earn a livelihood in a city that bans their work and a country that proscribes their presence. In an article featured in *The American Prospect*, Jesse Katz, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter, wrote about street vendors in the MacArthur Park area and their fight for the right to sell on the streets:

For many Latino immigrants, in particular, the ban on street vending represents the criminalization of their most entrepreneurial instincts, a restriction that thwarts self-sufficiency and discredits a cultural infrastructure centuries old. In the face of government

---

<sup>1</sup> LAMC, Section 42.00 (b) Street Sale of Goods Prohibited. No person, except as otherwise permitted by this section, shall on any sidewalk or street offer for sale, solicit the sale of, announce by any means the availability of, or have in his or her possession, control or custody, whether upon his or her person or upon some other animate or inanimate object, any goods, wares or merchandise which the public may purchase at any time.

<sup>2</sup> LACC, Section 7.62.020, prohibits vending food from commercial vehicles or pushcarts without a valid County Business License. Section 7.62.030, prohibits all vending from public sidewalks and allows vending on the public highways only from a motorized vehicle. All pushcarts or non-motorized vehicles are prohibited from vending upon any public thoroughfare.

<sup>3</sup> Cal Code Chapter 10, Section 114294. (a) All mobile food facilities and mobile support units shall meet the applicable requirements in Chapters 1 to 8, inclusive, and Chapter 13, unless specifically exempted from any of these provisions as provided in this chapter.

hostility, thousands of unlicensed, often undocumented *vendedores ambulantes* fan out, morning and night, day after day, perhaps L.A.'s longest-running act of civil disobedience. At once ephemeral and entrenched, they have reimagined public space, occupying it before there was an Occupy, extracting value from the paved landscape. Street vending might be a crime, but it is also a map: the geography of getting by (2012).

This dissertation offers an in-depth look at the lives that fruit vendors lead on and off the street corners where they work. It draws upon five years of ethnographic research, participant observation, and interviews with Los Angeles fruit vendors and their families in Mexico. I examine how they operate outside of the formal economy and the crafting, strategizing, and deal making that they engage in to make a sale, evade officials, and make ends meet. I interview vendors' families in Mexico to assess how life changed for them since their son's, daughter's, or husband's departure and examine the lasting and broken ties between them. Unlike the fruit vendors in the Pico-Union corridor crackdown, whose presence and work becomes visible to others only in the moments of their capture, I follow a group of fruit vendors through various points of their lives and analyze their complicated existence anchored by their informal work and undocumented status. The outcomes for this group are grim. Fruit vendors live and work precariously and face periodic episodes of financial and emotional calamity.

### **Los Angeles Fruit Vendors**

Since the 1970s, partly due to accelerated international migration and economic restructuring, informal economic activity in the United States has surged (Bromley 2000; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Sassen 1990; Sassen-Koob 1989). In Los Angeles, an important manifestation of the informal economy is the ubiquity of street vendors. In this city, rainbow-colored umbrellas conspicuously dot the urban landscape and under them, toiling behind pushcarts loaded down with several pounds of peeled fruit, immigrant street vendors ply their trade.



Fruit vendors sell made-to-order fruit salads served in a clear plastic bag and garnished with salt, chili powder, and lime. *Fruteros* work out of metal pushcarts that contain a variety of peeled and unpeeled fruits layered on top of several pounds of crushed ice. The pushcart has a collapsible metal tray table that locks in place to create a workspace. The top of the pushcart is encased in clear Plexiglas through which customers can see and pick the fruit they want. A typical pushcart will be stocked with watermelon, honeydew, cantaloupe, *jícama*, orange, pineapple, papaya, cucumber, coconut, mango, and lime.

Vendors typically spend \$60.00 to \$140.00 at the wholesale fruit market to stock a single pushcart. Profits vary on a daily basis. Summer months are more profitable for vendors; during these months they may make between \$100.00 and \$200.00 in profit per day. Winter months see a slowing of sales and it is not uncommon for vendors to lose money during this season. Depending on the neighborhood, vendors may also have to pay local gangs a fee (referred to as “tax” or “rent”) to work on the street corner.

Vendors who do not own their own pushcart and work for another vendor are paid a set amount that ranges from \$40.00 to \$60.00 a day, and can include a bit extra for lunch. In most cases, cart owners are fruit vendors themselves and will work one cart while hiring a worker to operate other carts. In a few instances, cart owners have multiple pushcarts and workers to operate them, and do not work as fruit vendors themselves. In these cases, cart owners are responsible for purchasing fruit from the wholesale market and transporting it to the preparation sites (e.g. commissaries or private residences). They are also tasked with dropping the pushcarts and workers in their designated street corners in the mornings and picking them up in the late afternoon. Cart owners sometimes also patrol the streets during the workday looking for Los

Angeles Health Department (LAHD) and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) caravans carrying out crackdowns.

The price of a pushcart varies; *carros piratas* (lower quality pushcarts) with no drainage system can cost \$800.00 to \$1,000.00. Pushcarts with drainage systems can cost between \$1,500.00 and \$2,000.00. Only pushcarts with a drainage system are eligible for public warehouse storage in commissaries—which costs \$100.00 to \$150.00 a month. The LAHD grants permits only to pushcarts with drainage systems that are stored in commissaries (as opposed to private residences). The process by which a pushcart can be certified and issued a permit is lengthy and, for many, prohibitively expensive (see Appendix A). The fee, as of July 2012, for beginning the certification process is \$649.00 and paying this fee does not guarantee that a pushcart will receive a permit. There is also a curious weakness in the certification system. While pushcarts may receive a sticker permit, street vending remains illegal in Los Angeles.<sup>4</sup> It is thus possible for a vendor working out of a certified pushcart to be issued a citation for vending. Vendors with certified pushcarts may also be issued citations and have goods confiscated for violating ordinances prohibiting food preparation on public streets. An LAHD certified cart may not be destroyed on-site<sup>5</sup> during crackdowns, but it can be impounded. The following section reviews the ordinances and penalties that vendors face in more detail.

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<sup>4</sup> While street vending is prohibited in the city of Los Angeles, there are special areas where vending is permissible. The Venice Beach Boardwalk is one such area; street vendors here are permitted to vend in designated areas along the boardwalk and are overseen by the LAPD and the Department of Parks and Recreation. Additionally, street vendors hawking printed matter are protected under the First Amendment. Other vendors operating from street-based motorized vehicles (e.g. hot dog street carts and taco trucks) are more commonly issued traffic citations for parking in one location for long periods of time.

<sup>5</sup> On-site destruction of carts is done with a garbage compactor truck. While the LAHD depends on this compacting for greater efficiency during a crackdown, it can be emotionally devastating to witness the destruction of personal property.

### ***Prohibitions and Penalties***

As mentioned earlier, fruit vendors operate in violation of Los Angeles Municipal Code, County Code, and California Retail Food Code regulations. In this section I outline the specific regulations that fruit vendors violate that lead to their illicit status and the penalties that they face. Cart owners and fruit vendors encounter different types of risks. Cart owners take on greater *financial* risk that increases with the number of carts they own—more carts make them more vulnerable. Fruit vendors are exposed to greater *personal* risk because they can be arrested if caught. A cart owner loses financially when his carts are confiscated as he will often pay fees to recover the carts or lose them altogether and be forced to invest in new carts. A fruit vendor is not expected to pay the fees to retrieve a pushcart or to pay the cart owner the cost of the pushcart if it is compacted on site. The personal risks to the fruit vendor come in the form of fines and arrest. While cart owners may pay fines, they do not always post bail for jailed workers.

Pushcarts with drainage systems and permits are not compacted on-site. *Carros piratas* are more likely to be impounded or compacted on site. However, due to prohibitively high fees (pushcart cost, commissary rent, permit fees), cart owners and fruit vendors often opt to use *carros piratas* and never go through the certification process. Impoundment depends on the equipment health inspectors bring with them when conducting crackdowns. A tow truck or compactor must be used to confiscate carts. Health inspectors may crackdown on vendors without trucks and compactors in an effort to move more stealthily through the city.

Health inspectors may remove, fine and/or arrest a fruit vendor if the vendor is deemed a nuisance or endangers public health. A “nuisance” is defined as any public nuisance known to common law that is dangerous to human life or detrimental to health; inadequate or unsanitary

sewerage or plumbing facilities; uncleanliness or anything that renders air, food and drink detrimental to the health of human beings.

According to the Los Angeles Municipal Code, fruit vendors are considered “hawkers,” that is, “any person who vends edible food or food products which are carried by such a person on a vehicle or on his person.” Hawkers have further food preparation restrictions. Hawkers cannot serve or sell prepared food unless it is prepared or compounded in an establishment that complies with applicable laws and ordinances (such as a certified food vehicle commissary). Since fruit vendors peel, cut, and prepare fruit salads on street corners, they are always in violation of this regulation. Vendors cannot afford to pre-package fruit in containers because fruit rots faster, customers will not buy it, and because this waste leads to a loss in profits. There is no permit fruit vendors can acquire to be allowed to peel, cut, and prepare fruit in the public right of way. Therefore, a fruit cart may be certified but fruit vending cannot. In sum, street-based fruit vending as commonly practiced by *fruteros*, is not allowed in Los Angeles, even when vendors have acquired health department licenses for their carts.

Operating without a public health license is prohibited and can be considered either a misdemeanor or a civil penalty. As a misdemeanor, fruit vending is punishable by a first time fine of up to \$100.00 and a subsequent fine of up to \$500.00 and/or imprisonment in the county jail for a period not to exceed six months. A civil penalty is punishable by a fine of not less than \$100.00 for a first violation and not less than \$500.00 for a second and subsequent violation. In both instances, a judge may prohibit the vendor from taking part in the activity again. If the individual is found selling fruit in violation of a judge’s explicit prohibition, the offense is deemed a civil penalty violation and is punishable by another fine of up to \$500.00.

The enforcement of codes varies. There are five typical scenarios when health inspectors crackdown on fruit vendors. The most severe includes: impounding the *carro pirata* and compacting it on-site, confiscating all fruit and utensils, issuing a citation and arresting a vendor. This occurs least often and mainly during large-scale crackdowns initiated by the LAHD in conjunction with the LAPD. In all instances in which an arrest is made, the Health Department operates with the LAPD. When the Health Department operates without the LAPD, no vendors are arrested. The least severe scenario includes a confiscation of utensils and a warning (see Table 1). Fruit vendors are always at risk of countywide crackdowns where the above regulations are enforced. Fruit vendors may not know when health department crackdowns will take place, but they do know that they will happen at one point or another.

In addition to these health code regulations, there are other ways in which fruit vendors are at risk. A fruit vendor who leaves his or her cart unattended is likely to attract the attention of police officers that may not have otherwise noticed that vendor; his or her goods may be confiscated as a result. In certain neighborhoods, gang members charge vendors rental fees in order to operate in the area. Payment may be requested in a set weekly cash payment or vendors may be forced to prepare fruit salads at no charge. Fruit vendors, because they carry large amounts of cash, are also always at risk of being mugged. Some people also harass vendors due to their unregulated or undocumented status—a vendor’s public presence leaves them vulnerable to a wide variety of verbal and physical attacks, though it should be noted the public nature of the job also helps to ensure that these attacks are curtailed or at least visible to others who may interfere and help.

In the following section I review the main literatures with which this dissertation is most closely in conversation. I address literature on undocumented migration to the U.S., informal workers, informality and immigrant entrepreneurship, and the right to public space.

### ***U.S.-Mexico Migration and Undocumented Immigrants***

A report issued by the Pew Hispanic Center in April 2012 proclaimed: “After four decades that brought 12 million current immigrants—most of whom came illegally—the net migration flow from Mexico to the United States has stopped and may have reversed” (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). The Pew Center reported that this standstill was the result of many factors, some of which included a weakened U.S. job and housing construction market, increased border enforcement, and rising numbers of deportations. Most of the fruit vendors in this study began arriving in the United States in the early 2000s. They entered the country just as a period of economic decline began. They also bore the brunt of major shifts in immigration policy at the local and federal level. These issues all contributed to creating a harsher context of reception than the one undocumented migrants and immigrants encountered several decades ago.

According to the Pew Report, as of 2011, the number of unauthorized Mexican immigrants in the U.S. decreased to 6.1 million.<sup>6</sup> The decrease, they noted, was due to both fewer immigrants entering the U.S. and to an increase in the immigrants returning to Mexico. From 1995 to 2000, three million Mexicans had immigrated to the U.S. but between 2005 and 2010 that number was down to 1.4 million. Between 2005 and 2010, the number of Mexicans and their children who moved from the U.S. to Mexico was 1.4 million, double the number who had done so in the five-year period a decade before.

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<sup>6</sup> This number is only for undocumented immigrants from Mexico. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security estimated that in 2010 there were 11.6 million undocumented immigrants in the country with 59 percent believed to be from Mexico alone. Immigrants from El Salvador were a distant second with some 660,000 believed to be in U.S. without papers.

The economic decline began shortly after I first met the fruit vendors of this study in 2006. The housing bubble burst began in late 2006. Unemployment rates began to slowly rise in July 2007 to 4.7 percent and reaching an all-time high in October 2009 at 10 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). Meanwhile, 2007 saw a peak in the number of undocumented immigrants with nearly seven million unauthorized immigrants arriving from Mexico alone—this trend reversed in the years that followed (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). The combination of an economic recession and large waves of migration created a highly competitive job market in which jobs were scarce and cheap labor plentiful. As a result, for the migrants of my study, street vending became a viable option despite the high visibility, high risk, and low profit margins associated with the work.

On a national level, the negative outcomes Mexican migrants experienced in the U.S. affected the economic and social contact they had with their families and sending communities. As early as 2008, decreases in remittances and higher incidences of return migration were widely documented in Mexico (Lazo 2008; Ratha, Mohapadra, and Zhimei 2008). In fact, the Mexican Secretary of Treasury (*Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público*) expected the economic downturn in the U.S. to result in a decline of \$2.5 billion dollars in remittances from 2007 to 2008 (González Amador 2008; Wilson 2009). The state of Puebla, where many of the fruit vendors in this study are from, was among ten Mexican states identified as being at risk of economic collapse due to decreased remittances from migrants in the U.S. and because of their return migration (Franco 2008; Wilson 2009).<sup>7</sup>

The high visibility of street vendors, in turn, fueled anti-immigrant sentiment among private citizens and bureaucratic agencies that responded by reporting and cracking down on

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<sup>7</sup> The ten states included: Zacatecas, Michoacán, Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Campeche, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, Querétaro, and Jalisco.

their presence. Los Angeles has long been considered a sanctuary city for immigrants who benefitted, for example, from Special Order 40. This police mandate was implemented in 1979 and prevents LAPD officers from questioning individuals for the sole purpose of determining an immigration status—a measure meant to establish trust between officers and the city’s various immigrant communities. Sanctuary cities follow certain practices to protect their resident illegal immigrants. The term is generally given to cities that do not allow municipal funds and resources to be used to enforce federal immigration laws. Over the last few years, changes in federal immigration policy have impacted this sanctuary city designation. On August 27, 2009 Los Angeles became an activated jurisdiction of the Secure Communities (S-Comm) Program under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Secure Communities is a federal information-sharing partnership between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (ICE 2012a; ICE 2012b). When local law enforcement agencies arrest or book individuals, their fingerprints are sent to the FBI to check for a criminal record and then forwarded to ICE to check against immigration databases. ICE then determines if an individual is unlawfully in the U.S. and prioritizes their removal based on their crime, criminal history, and other factors such as repeat violations of immigration laws. Federal DHS officers make the immigration enforcement decisions after individuals are arrested for criminal violations of local, state, or federal law and not violations of immigration law. The Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) unit manages the custody, detention, and removal of those deportable individuals.

Programs like S-Comm impact *fruteros* because they can, and have been, arrested for misdemeanors such as street vending, driving without a license, and driving under the influence. Since August 2009, all inmates booked into Los Angeles County jails have had their immigration



status checked. Although Secure Communities is meant to identify and deport undocumented immigrants with severe criminal records, when fruit vendors are arrested for vending or driving without a license, they are entered into a system of checks that identify them as undocumented individuals. Because some of them have been apprehended by Border Patrol agents while attempting to cross into the U.S. or have been previously deported, when they are arrested for a misdemeanor offense like vending it can set into motion proceedings that result in deportation. Carl Berquist, a policy advocate with the Coalition of Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), noted in a USC Annenberg digital news report, “[With S-Comm] they go after low-hanging fruit [i.e. someone who just happens to have been arrested, whether it is for selling tacos on a sidewalk or speeding on the way to work] as well as serious criminals. They won’t admit the first part” (Kang 2011). And as Nicholas De Genova writes, “illegality” signals a *spatialized* sociopolitical condition, “the legal production of ‘illegality’ provides an apparatus for sustaining Mexican migrants’ vulnerability and tractability—as workers—whose labor-power, because it is deportable, becomes an eminently disposable commodity” (2005: 216).

This study offers an in-depth look at a group of undocumented migrants living and working in Los Angeles in the midst of an economic recession, the implementation of Secure Communities, rising numbers of deportations, and unprecedented migration patterns from Mexico. In the late 1970s, Jorge Bustamante wrote: “In the last three decades, the number of empirical studies [on undocumented Mexican immigrants and migration] have not corresponded to the prominence given to the issue of undocumented migration from Mexico in the mass media” (1977: 151). Since then, research on undocumented Mexican and Latino immigrant populations in the U.S. has grown (Chavez 1990; Chavez 1991; Chavez 1992; De Genova 2005; Mahler 1995; Smith 2006). These studies have focused on widespread issues including how

social ties and networks can expand immigrants' human and social capital (Dominguez 2011); how migrants have fared during the economic downturn (Fitzgerald, Alarcon, and Muse-Orlinoff 2011); and the liminal status of undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants (Chavez 1991). This dissertation offers a ground-level account of one group of undocumented and informal workers in an effort to contribute to this expanding literature.

### ***Informal Workers, Informality, and Immigrant Entrepreneurship***

While it is difficult to accurately count the number of street vendors who work on the streets of Los Angeles, there are estimates of the number of informal workers in the city and county. The Economic Roundtable, a nonprofit public policy research organization, estimated that there were 679,000 informal workers<sup>8</sup> in the county and 303,800 in the city in 2004; they further estimated that undocumented immigrants made up 61 percent of the informal labor force in the county and 65 percent in the city. We do not know how many of these informal workers are street vendors, versus day laborers and gardeners for example, but these aggregate numbers are significant. In 2000, the U.S. Census released its own findings that counted nearly 5,000 street vendors in LA County. Several commentators believed this was a drastic undercount. However, the Census data showed that Hispanics accounted for 60 percent of all street vendors in Los Angeles County (see Table 2).<sup>9</sup> Foreign-born street vendors made up 62.5 percent of the whole. Among those foreign born, 41 percent were from Mexico. Non-U.S. citizens accounted for 47 percent of street vendors. Given this demographic information, the population of Latino,

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<sup>8</sup> The Economic Roundtable defines "informal workers" as those individuals who are not in formal data sources, that operate outside of established labor laws, and that would be considered legal but are not regulated. They exclude criminal activities that are a subset of the informal economy.

<sup>9</sup> The Census Occupation Detail Code 495 includes door-to-door sales workers, news and street vendors and other related workers. Tabulations here excluded industry code 647 (news vendors). The category of "street vendors" therefore includes door-to-door sales workers, street vendors and other related workers.

and largely Mexican, undocumented immigrant fruit vendors I study is representative of the whole.

Because I focus on a specific type of street vendor and because they are all Latinos, this research has several limitations. This work is not comparative; I do not study strategies of heterogeneous populations of vendors. According to the 2000 Census, 54 percent of street vendors were women and yet in my study there are very few female fruit vendors. This could be due, in part, to the physical strength that is needed to load heavy carts on trucks or a result of gendered social networks. The urban sprawl of Los Angeles limited the number of vendors I was able to interact with and the neighborhoods I was able to access regularly. However, this dissertation offers an in-depth view at one informal entrepreneurial venture and the obstacles that migrants within that venture face.

For this reason, immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurship literature is relevant. The business of fruit vending exists in an economic sector that the state cannot overtly support but may be inclined to tolerate. In what follows I synthesize the literature on the informal sector with the literature on immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurship.

Fruit vendors operate informally at the bottom end of a market and therefore some may contest my use of the label “entrepreneur.” Though vendors do not revolutionize or reform the pattern of production (Schumpeter 1974) they do introduce new products and new ways of marketing (Kloosterman and Rath 2003). I argue that the designation of entrepreneur can be used for those operating informally. It is a categorization that is not only meant for those working in the formal sector of capitalist enterprises; in fact, many informal and underground activities resemble counterparts in the formal sector (Levitt and Dubner 2005; Venkatesh 1994; Venkatesh 2002; Venkatesh 2006).

Saskia Sassen (1993; 1994) writes that informalization is a structured outcome of advanced economies and not simply its precursor.<sup>10</sup> In the literature, the concept of the “informal sector” emerged from within modern and advanced economies. It emerged as an antithesis to advanced economies. From the very beginning, the informal sector was defined by what it was not, which is to say, for a scholar working from within a modern society, the informal sector encapsulated all that was not modern. The informal sector represented that economic system which was not regulated (it included both licit and illicit goods and services), not large, not industrial, and not based on modern-day notions of capitalism (Boeke 1953; Geertz 1963; Lewis 1954).<sup>11</sup> Instead of viewing informalization and the informal sector as the polar opposite of capitalism and the formal sector, we must see them both as extensions of one another.

To this end, some scholars show how the state causes the informal sector (or informalization) to expand. Hernando De Soto’s (2002) groundbreaking book about informality in Peru attributed its existence to overregulation by the state.<sup>12</sup> Peru’s expensive and abundant labor regulations increased the “costs of formality” such that formalization was altogether avoided (Bromley 1990). The high levels of regulation, therefore, had as an unintended consequence an increasingly unregulated economy. The high costs of formality were also

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<sup>10</sup> More specifically, Sassen argues that the decline of the manufacturing sector, the rise of the service sector, increasing earning inequalities and the subsequent restructuring of consumption have all contributed not only to the expansion of informality but to its embeddedness within the current economic system.

<sup>11</sup> Prior to the introduction of the term “informal sector” in the early 1970s, scholars had acknowledged non-modern economic systems using different names. Some called these economic systems “traditional” (Boeke 1953) or “bazaar economies” (Geertz 1963) or “rural” (Lewis 1954) but throughout there seemed to be a duality in usage. One economic system was contrasted with another: modern with traditional; firm-centered with bazaar economy; urban industrial with rural agricultural.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note, as Bromley (1990) makes clear, that De Soto spoke of “informality” while development/ILO researchers spoke of the “informal sector.” De Soto promoted deregulation, debureaucratization and privatization to remove unfair competition, while development scholars promoted increased public sector investment that would abolish informal sector enterprises.

acknowledged by the state, which responded by using “extra-legal” arrangements that clandestinely regulated the unregulated (De Soto 2002: 9).

Other scholars incorporate the state’s role in the perpetuation or enhancement of informalization by focusing on the gap between state policy and state implementation by state agents. The gap between the two provides opportunities for collusion and corruption (Scott 1972). Others have a more innocuous assessment of the state’s role, Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia (1989) believe that ambiguous legislation, exemptions in the Labor Code, conflicting interpretations, and varying degrees of enforcement capabilities lead the state to indirectly expand the informal sector.

The informal cannot be at odds with the formal. We know informal economic activity within advanced economies is widespread. If we accept that informalization is part of capitalism, we can then appropriate terms like “entrepreneur” and analyze informal small businesses in the same way we analyze formal small businesses. For this reason, the immigrant and ethnic entrepreneur literature, focused on small businesses operating within the formal sector, can be successfully appropriated to explain how, why, and to what extent Latino fruit vendors are able to create and sustain their street vending operations.

One of the earliest works to take seriously the importance of immigrant and ethnic small business entrepreneurs was that of Ivan Light (1972). Other works focusing on ethnic businesses in the United States (Cummings 1980) and in Britain (Ward and Jenkins 1984) followed, but it was the work of Roger Waldinger et al. (1990) that proved to be the landmark study of immigrant and ethnic businesses in the U.S. and Western Europe. In an attempt to explain how immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurship comes about, this literature has provided four explanatory frameworks: supply side, demand side/opportunity structures, the interactive model, and mixed

embeddedness. I will review each of the frameworks and then assess if and how they relate to my fruit vendor population.

The supply side explanatory framework focuses on characteristics of the entrepreneurs themselves and not the broader context in which they operate. Economists and sociologists alike have contributed to this supply side framework. Economists tend to focus on the human capital of individuals to assess whether economic ventures will be successful (Borjas 1990). For example, economist Timothy Bates (1997) assesses success based on traditional business variables. He finds that those most likely to do well are highly educated, skilled, and have significant start-up financial capital. Bates measures success independent of race, ethnicity or immigrant status. That some ethnic and immigrant groups have higher rates of business failure is not attributable to their membership in a particular group but rather to their limited education, skills, and financial resources.

Sociologists, on the other hand, stress the importance of group membership and group characteristics by focusing on variables such as social capital and group resources (Light and Gold 2000; Waldinger 1996; Yoon 1997; Zhou 1992). In their work, Light and Gold survey the growth and significance of immigrant minority-owned or operated businesses. They conclude that the success of ethnic economies depends on a mix of ethnic and class resources. Cross-class cooperation on the basis of group ancestry, mutual assistance associations, ethnic philanthropy, political leadership, and cultural identity all become important characteristics in determining growth and success rates of immigrant business. While some scholars (Light and Gold 2000; Yoon 1997) do bring in contextual characteristics, the focus remains largely on characteristics of the entrepreneurs themselves.

Scholars who focus on demand side or opportunity structures place the emphasis on context. The important variables of the different “socio-economic spaces” in which immigrant entrepreneurs operate include: sectoral and income distribution, financial systems, available technology, welfare systems, and rules and regulations (Kloosterman and Rath 2003). Research with a focus on opportunity structures argues that immigrants gravitate towards self-employment because of blocked mobility due to racist practices (Blaustein 1972), glass ceilings (Chant 2006), excessive regulation (De Soto 2002), economic restructuring (Sassen 1993), and unfavorable loan policies (Light and Bonacich 1988). Increasing immigration from less-developed countries to advanced economies is also viewed as a structural process that increases the potential supply of immigrant entrepreneurs (Kloosterman and Rath 2003). Placing the focus on opportunity structures produces scholarship that reveals the *lack* of opportunities for immigrants and ethnics. These limited opportunities thus lead to a growth of immigrant and ethnic-owned and operated businesses. However, like the supply side explanatory model, this demand side framework is incomplete.

Waldinger et al. (1990) developed a framework based on three interactive components—opportunity structures, group characteristics, and ethnic strategies—to explain the growth and varying levels of success among immigrant businesses. Opportunity structures refer to the market conditions in which ethnic entrepreneurs operate that provide access to ethnic and non-ethnic consumer markets. For example, government regulations and inter-ethnic competition are important structural variables because they can either facilitate or block entry. By group characteristics, the authors mean pre-immigration circumstances, the group’s reaction to the host country (cf. Portes and Stepick 1985), and resource mobilization through their ethnic community. Finally, ethnic strategies are the result of the interaction between opportunity

structures and group characteristics. This model moves beyond simple supply side or demand side explanations. In sharp contrast to the neoclassical economics (supply side) approach, Waldinger writes that ethnic entrepreneurs are “social outsiders who must compensate for the typical background deficits of their groups and the discrimination they encounter through the use of their distinctive sociocultural resources” (Waldinger 1993: 695).

Kloosterman and Rath critiqued the interactive model for being more a classification than an explanatory model (2003). Their contribution to this debate is the mixed embeddedness model which combines agency and structural perspectives (Kloosterman, Leun, and Rath 1999). They place the focus on the “various institutional frameworks [that] bring about divergent post-industrial self-employment trajectories and hence different opportunity structures for entrepreneurs, locals and immigrant alike” (1999: 8).

Within the United States and for the population of fruit vendors of this study, the influence of institutional frameworks is varied. Immigration laws prohibit fruit vendors from establishing a legal presence and work authorization due to their undocumented mode of entry and so from the onset they are pushed into the informal sector. Minimum wage laws do apply to undocumented immigrants but are often not enforced within the informal sector. Their entrepreneurship emerges *in spite* of the institutional and structural obstacles (i.e. regulations and penalties) much the same way that their presence in the United States endures despite structural and institutional obstacles (i.e. immigration laws). The interactive model, because it takes into account three very important components, is best suited to analyze the entrepreneurial activities of fruit vendors. This model allows me to explore the opportunity structures (i.e. local regulations, consumer markets), group characteristics (selective migration, social networks, trust networks), and resulting ethnic strategies (*paisanaje*).



### *Urban Public Space Use and the Right to the City*

Street vending is a practice that is at times tolerated, restricted, and promoted by various policies and actors. In recent years, street vending has drawn the attention and ire of politicians, planning departments, neighborhood associations, and health departments. Issues regarding the use of public space and local ordinance enforcement are often complicated by the street vendors' ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as their immigrant status. Latino immigrant street vendors, like other street-based workers, often find themselves on the front lines when issues of immigration reform, anti-immigrant sentiment, and xenophobia arise. The public nature of their work makes them particularly vulnerable. Fruit vendors' presence in public spaces throughout the city begins a useful discussion about issues regarding the use of public space and immigrants' "right to the city."<sup>13</sup>

Some have argued that the widespread prohibition of street vending fell in line with the vision city builders had of Los Angeles as a "Midwestern suburb by the sea, linked by the automobile" and not the immigrant mecca it is today (Katz 2012). Historian William Deverell wrote that Los Angeles was a city that, "even in its expressions of institutional and infrastructural growth, adhered to patterns of racial privilege and ethnocentrism" (2004: 5). It was a city that invented itself by whitewashing over other stories and cultures and came of age amidst and in response to Mexican ethnicity and Mexican spaces (Deverell 2004). And yet, despite the turn of the century exercises in racial eugenics, Los Angeles came to be the nation's largest immigrant metropolis. In 2012, thirty-five percent of Los Angeles County residents are foreign-born. In 2009, estimates suggested that Los Angeles County was home to 762,000 undocumented immigrants (Almanac 2012). A sizeable number of street vendors in Los Angeles are

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<sup>13</sup> The "right to the city" debate encompasses questions such as: Who should and should not possess the right to freely access public spaces?

undocumented Latino immigrants. Their significant presence is apparent to any casual observer. But what does their presence mean and how can we begin to make sense of it? Do they have a right to access public spaces? Do they have a right to work in them?

Don Mitchell (2003) notes that the right to inhabit public space has always been a polarized and contested issue. In his work, Mitchell focuses on the right to assemble, demonstrate, and exist (i.e. be homeless) in public spaces. In this project, I focus on work in public space. Seeking work and working in public spaces are different legal issues. Latino day laborers seeking work on public street corners are protected by the First Amendment (Campbell 2009); fruit vendors working in those same spaces are prohibited (see LAMC 42.00b). Both are subjected to scrutiny but fruit vendors are often subjected to increased policing from the LAPD, LAHD, and private citizens—who are motivated by community and problem-oriented policing (Livingston 1997; Muniz 2011). “Quality of life” policing philosophies and initiatives have further restricted the presence of so-called unwanted populations; they act as “‘coded codes’—facially neutral ordinances [e.g. nuisance regulations] enacted to address immigration concerns and target specific communities” (Martos 2010: 2102). Fruit vendors are policed not only for their illicit work, but also for *being* in public spaces. As a result of these ordinances and initiatives, scholars have bemoaned the loss of the public sphere and public space (Davis 1992; Sennett 1974).

In an effort to respond to this narrative of loss, Margaret Crawford (1995) suggests that street vendors and the homeless in Los Angeles are “counter-publics” who create another discourse with regards to the use of public space; their presence represents a new form of “insurgent citizenship.” As Crawford writes, “the demands of the urban poor for ‘rights to the city’ and of women and ethnic and racial minorities to ‘rights to difference’ constitute new kinds

of rights, based on the needs of lived experience outside the normative and institutional definitions of the state and its legal codes” (1995: 8-9). I argue that the presence of fruit vendors in public spaces throughout Los Angeles is both a catalyst for subjugation and an act of defiance.

### **Current Study**

In an effort to contribute to the literature on undocumented immigrants, informal work, and the use of public space, the central concern of this dissertation is to systematically consider the social and economic lives of a group of fruit vendors in the premier immigrant destination of Los Angeles. In this study I focus on the everyday street-based work life of vendors, the strategizing that they engage in to secure a livelihood in a high-risk occupation, the informal agreements that are meant to maintain the flow of economic exchange, and how outcomes in the U.S. are tied to families left behind in Mexico. This dissertation examines various aspects of fruit vendors’ lives and the opportunities and setbacks that they encounter to answer the broad research question: What are the most salient aspects of fruit vendors’ lives and how do these affect their outcomes, livelihood, and personal relationships?

### ***Methods***

This study is based on in-depth formal interviews, street-based informal interviews, participant observation, and five years of ethnographic field research among fruit vendors in Los Angeles. I visited multiple vendors in locations in west, central, and south Los Angeles, as well as in the city of Santa Monica and the neighborhood of Venice. I worked as a fruit vendor in two locations: in an affluent mid-city neighborhood and in a working-class neighborhood closer to downtown Los Angeles. I spent a significant amount of time before and after normal working hours in two private residences of fruit vendors. The residential locations were important meeting points; one functioned as a preparation location—cutting fruit, loading carts—in the early mornings and the other as an after-work social gathering location. For a period of ten

months I also helped two vendors prepare and store carts at a commissary in the Cypress Park area of Los Angeles. This commissary is a warehouse storage space that provides county-certified spaces for storing and prepping food carts. The commissary housed various types of food carts, from the larger curbside parked hot dog carts to the smaller ice cream freezer pushcarts. Every visit to a field site resulted in several pages of field notes; the five years of research have resulted in hundreds of pages of field notes.

I conducted 22 informal and formal interviews with Mexican and Guatemalan fruit vendors working within Los Angeles County. I also regularly saw but had limited interaction with another six vendors though I was always given updates about them. Towards the end of my fieldwork I assisted two of these six (husband and wife) through some issues following a traffic stop that led to the arrest and deportation of the husband. All except one of these vendors were undocumented; the only vendor with citizenship was born in the United States but spent his formative years in Puebla and thus had very limited English language fluency. For the formally interviewed vendors (N=17), I designed a semi-structured interview guide that asked open-ended questions about occupational experiences (see Appendix B). Formal interviews took place after work hours in pick-up trucks, living rooms, and restaurants, were audio recorded and lasted between 38 minutes to two hours. I conducted informal interviews while prepping carts in the morning or on street corners during the vendors' workday. I did not audio record informal interviews, but generally covered the same themes found on the interview guide. I use direct quotes from the formal interviews and paraphrase informal interviews and conversations.

I also conducted formal, audio-recorded interviews with family members and former fruit vendors residing in Dos Mundos<sup>14</sup> in the Mexican state of Puebla (see Figure 2). I conducted nine formal interviews with the family members—parents, wives, grandmothers, cousins—of seven fruit vendors from Dos Mundos. I also re-interviewed one vendor who had returned to Dos Mundos (I had previously met and interviewed him in Los Angeles). Two other vendors who had returned to Mexico were not in Dos Mundos when I visited and I was only able to speak to them via phone after interviewing their mothers in Dos Mundos. I also interviewed the parents of one vendor in Mexico City. One family in Dos Mundos declined to participate in the research; these were the parents of three vendors I had spoken to only casually in Los Angeles. I conducted the interviews in Dos Mundos and Mexico City over the course of two weeks. A vendor's grandmother provided housing while I was in Dos Mundos. I travelled with a research assistant to all the interviews in Dos Mundos and in Mexico City. I arranged the majority of interviews with family members in Dos Mundos prior to leaving Los Angeles; in these instances I sought the permission of vendors in the United States.

All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish by the author. Formally interviewed participants in Los Angeles and Mexico were monetarily compensated for their time. The author, a research assistant, or a professional transcribing agency transcribed all formal interviews verbatim. The author translated the majority of the interviews with help from a research assistant. Informal interviews were reconstructed from memory and notes taken on site. Informally interviewed vendors were not monetarily compensated. When possible, data collected through informal interviews was presented to the interviewee for confirmation and correction of sentiments expressed and documented. In no case was data modified after this verification

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<sup>14</sup> The name of the town in Puebla was altered to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. The name was chosen because the patron saint of the town was said to be a link between our earthly world and the next; depictions of the saint show him holding a small earth in his hands.

process took place. Field notes and interviews were coded into themes for analysis. Coding, organizing, and analyzing of data was based on grounded theory methods.

I found initial participants in Los Angeles by approaching vendors in distinct neighborhoods throughout west and central Los Angeles. The vendors approached were neither randomly selected nor representative. A few of these vendors declined to participate in the research. Other visits resulted in several different snowball samples. The majority of the study participants hail from the Mexican state of Puebla. I may have oversampled *Poblanos*, but all information gathered (including that from non-*Poblanos*) pointed to their overrepresentation in the fruit vending business. Three key participants from a central Los Angeles location proved to be instrumental in providing introductions to different networks of fruit vendors. These participants—regarded as my main informants—were also instrumental in providing access to social events where other vendors gathered (e.g. baptisms, house parties, birthday celebrations). IRB-approved information sheets were distributed to all formally interviewed and audio-recorded participants in Los Angeles and Mexico.<sup>15</sup> I received verbal consent from all informants regardless of whether they were formally interviewed and audio recorded.

The two neighborhoods that served as my participant observation vending sites are distinct (see Table 3). The mid-city vending site is located along a major thoroughfare in front of a bank in the shadow of a well-known education and philanthropic women’s organization. Mid-rise office buildings line this major boulevard and large, beautifully manicured homes are located in the adjacent residential areas—including the Getty House, the official residence of the mayor of Los Angeles. There are few pedestrians, though an occasional jogger sporting an iPod, pushing a jogging stroller, or both, will sometimes pass by this space. The majority of the customers are headed to or returning from bank-related visits, while other customers include

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<sup>15</sup> UCLA IRB Study #10-001034-AM-00002

office workers from the adjacent buildings or blue-collar workers who pulled off the main thoroughfare for fruit. Customers here are of mixed racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds but the majority are Latino professionals.

The second vending site, closer to downtown Los Angeles, is located in a large gas station lot. Four fruit vendors occupy this space, each about 30 feet from the other. Other street vendors work adjacent corners, including a roasted corn vendor and a hot dog vendor. This location is in the shadow of a large commercial center catering to Latino customers (through Spanish language advertising). It is not uncommon to see ambulances or police cars blaze by with their sirens blaring. Every time I visited this site helicopters thundered overhead. This location is a busy public transportation node and as a result many pedestrians can be observed hurrying to or from buses and metro links. In the late afternoon, Latino families descend from their apartment buildings for neighborhood strolls. The majority of customers were working-class Latinos buying fruit on their way to or from the public transportation nodes.

### ***Layout of the Dissertation***

Chapter One, “Making the Sale” examines how fruit vendors craft the semiotic space that passersby navigate and how they make that semiotic space appear mundane and ordinary. I identify four axes that fruit vendors use to craft their semiotic space. These axes include: standardization and recognizability in pushcart presentation, performance of hygiene, solicitation, and familiarity. The first three axes are dependent on interpretations of external signs, while the fourth axis is cultivated across time through interactions between customers and vendors. I show how vendors operate within the informal sector in order to achieve similar goals that businesses within the formal sector accomplish.

Chapter Two, “Survival, Economic Mobility, and Community,” I assess how fruit vendors attempt to survive in a punitive regulatory environment. I show how the ordinances that prohibit their presence lead to the creation of survival strategies among the *frutero* community. I analyze four survival strategies: reliance on kinship and *paisano* networks; street patrols and alerts; geographical positioning and alliance building; and the performance and maintenance of personal, professional and symbolic hygiene. I argue that the limited gains and continuous losses experienced by fruit vendors following health and police department enforcement create a cycle of low income, high debt, and minimal to no mobility. These strategies thus allow for short-term survival but fail to bolster long-term upward mobility.

Chapter Three, “Informal Agreements: Trust, Control, and Bounded Opportunity” examines the informal agreements that fruit vendors routinely forge in order to exchange goods, services, and currency. I explain the role that trust networks, social control, and bounded opportunity play in these agreements. I focus on two types of agreements: securing loans and credit lines and crafting employment arrangements. For the first type of agreements, I show how trust networks and social control function to maintain the flow of economic exchange. For the second type of agreements, those dealing with employment arrangements, I show how trust is broken and use the Cuban notion of *resolviendo* [resolving/getting by] to assess how vendors confront and manage the conflict that arises as a consequence.<sup>16</sup>

Chapter Four, “Migrants of Dos Mundos: Immigrant Outcomes and Sending Community” examines the far-reaching influence of a sending community on migrant outcomes in the U.S. I explain fruit vendors’ negative outcomes in the U.S. by focusing on two factors of their sending community. First, I show that the hometown they come from has a strong cross-border influence that guides migrants into certain cities and occupations. This helps to explain

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<sup>16</sup> *Resolviendo* implies engaging in acts of ingenuity and/or unscrupulous tactics.



why these migrants enter into and remain in the informal and high-risk fruit vending occupation. Next, I focus on the cross-border competing interests that vie for migrants' limited social and economic attention. I classify these competing interests into three general types: (1) Cost of living obligations vs. Family obligations, (2) U.S. families vs. Mexico families and (3) Private sphere expenditures vs. Public sphere expenditures. The effect of these two factors—limiting work options and stretching financial resources—is compounded by a negative context of reception.

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings of the empirical chapters and emphasizes the precarious home and work life that *frutereros* lead in Los Angeles. I illustrate some of the long-term effects of this precariousness; namely, limited to no upward mobility, the creation of bounded community and bounded opportunity, voluntary and forced return migration, and strained ties between fruit vendors in the U.S. and their families in Mexico. This chapter also examines the possibility of change through the modification of city and county laws. I conclude by noting the broader policy and theoretical implications of the dissertation.

**Figure 1. Fruit vendor on a street corner with customers**



Source: Photo taken by author.

**Table 1. Varying Degrees of LAPD and LAHD Punitive Measures**

Most Severe	On-site pushcart disposal/destruction Fruit disposal Utensil confiscation Citation Arrest
	Pushcart impoundment Fruit disposal Utensil confiscation Citation Arrest
	Partial fruit disposal Utensil confiscation Citation
	Utensil confiscation Citation
	Citation
	Least Severe

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Los Angeles County Street Vendors (N= 4,949)<sup>abc</sup>**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative
White	1,356	27.40	27.40
Black	230	4.65	32.05
Asian & Pacific Islanders	351	7.09	39.14
Hispanic	2,983	60.27	99.41
Other	29	0.59	100
Total	4,949	100	

*Source: 2000 United States Census*

<sup>a</sup> All data are weighted

<sup>b</sup> Includes door-to-door sales workers, street vendors, and other related workers

<sup>c</sup> Excludes news vendors

**Figure 2. Map of Puebla, Mexico**



Source: [www.pickatrail.com](http://www.pickatrail.com)

**Table 3. Characteristics of Field Site Neighborhoods in Los Angeles**

	<i>Vending Sites</i>		<i>Residential Sites</i>		<i>Commissary</i>
	Mid-Wilshire	Pico-Union	Highland Park	Vermont Square	Cypress Park
2000 Population	41,683	42,324	57,566	45,284	9,764
Square miles	2.78	1.67	3.42	2.54	0.72
People per square mile	14,988	25,352	16,835	17,798	13,478
Median household income (2008 dollars)	\$58,483	\$26,424	\$45,478	\$29,904	\$42,615
Median Age	34 yrs	27 yrs	28 yrs	26 yrs	27 yrs
Education (# of residents)					
Less than high school	4,317	15,770	15,730	13,053	3,575
High school	4,231	3,796	6,061	4,931	783
Some college	8,378	2,811	6,634	5,059	758
Bachelor's degree	9,162	1,180	3,296	920	298
Masters or higher	4,820	439	1,443	366	173
Ethnicity (%)					
White	33.6%	3.0%	11.3%	1.4%	4.9%
Latino	19.9	85.4	72.4	56.5	82.1
Black	22.7	2.9	2.4	39.2	0.6
Asian	19.8	7.6	11.2	1.1	11.1
Other	3.9	1.1	2.6	1.8	1.3
Occupied Housing Units (%)					
Renters	78.3%	90.5%	60.9%	63.2%	58.3%
Owners	21.7	9.5	39.1	36.8	41.7
Foreign Born	14,111	27,346	25,982	17,448	5,130
Foreign Born (%)	33.9%	64.6%	45.1%	38.5%	52.5%
Most Common Foreign Places of Birth					
China	-	-	-	-	6.3%
El Salvador	-	24.4%	12%	24.5%	-
Korea	24%	-	-	-	-
Mexico	16.1%	45.6%	55.3%	50.1%	73.2%

Sources: 2000 US Census, LA Times Mapping Los Angeles Project  
<http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods>

## CHAPTER ONE

### MAKING THE SALE

One afternoon in early July of 2010, I visited Carmen at her vending corner. The visit was casual and meant for catching up. Not expecting to vend that day, I was dressed a bit nicer than usual in a button-up white blouse, a black cardigan, dark pants, and black leather shoes. As soon as I arrived, Carmen asked me to watch her pushcart while she exchanged some twenty-dollar bills for singles at the bank. I agreed and stood waiting in front of her pushcart in the customer position with a grey LeSportsac handbag slung across my body. A few minutes later, a car pulled into the bank parking lot and a twenty-something Asian woman jumped out of the passenger seat. She walked briskly towards me and asked how much the fruit salads cost. I looked at her and said, “I’m not the fruit vendor, but she will be right back.” The Asian woman said “oh” and looked awkwardly at the ground, then back at the car she had arrived in all the while inching away from me. She crossed one arm over the other cupping her right elbow with her left hand. There was an awkward silence between us and—in an effort to dissipate the tension—I offered to make her the fruit salad. I explained that I was the vendor’s cousin (a common designation Carmen used with me) and had worked with her before. Instantly, she perked up and moved closer to look at the fruit while I took off my bag. I told her the prices, and she asked for a five-dollar bag. I saw that she had a twenty-dollar bill and told her that I had no change. She ran back to her car for a five-dollar bill. I gave her the fruit bag and she walked away. Immediately afterward, a middle-aged Latina woman approached. By this time, I had a plastic glove on my left hand and had just finished wiping off the cutting board. The Latina woman came right up to me and looked me up and down without saying anything. After squinting her eyes and cocking

her head as she assessed the situation, she finally asked if I worked there. As she was walking up, she had seen me attending to the young Asian customer. I told her that I knew the fruit vendor and that she had run into the bank for change. Only then did she order her fruit salad, although still a bit hesitantly.

Although buying a fruit salad from a street vendor in Los Angeles is a seemingly mundane interaction, closer scrutiny reveals that customers are navigating a complex semiotic space that has been carefully crafted and organized by vendors to *appear* mundane and ordinary. When the Asian woman approached me—a Latina standing alone under a colorful umbrella and next to a pushcart—the outward signs and symbols of this scenario, as well as her own expectation of interacting with another person of color, resulted in her request for prices. She was a novice customer with some broad, but unrefined, expectations. My hesitation in responding resulted in an unintended “breaching experiment” of sorts in which the expected interaction was interrupted (Garfinkel 1967). The strength of the reaction, as manifested in that awkward silence between us, was an indication of both the well-crafted semiotic space that we inhabited and of the strength of the roles we were each expected to play. The subsequent interaction with the older Latina woman revealed how repeated interactions and experience with vendors allow customers to become *connoisseurs* and develop a more nuanced perception of the semiotic landscape. For the Latina woman, who bought fruit regularly from Carmen and other vendors, seeing me standing behind (not in front of) the pushcart with a gloved hand was not enough to initiate the customer-vendor interaction. She was a connoisseur customer with a trained eye and knew that my style of dress did not fit into the semiotic space into which I had inserted myself. This chapter analyzes how *fruterios* craft the semiotic space that potential customers navigate.



Vendors must craft a semiotic space in part because of their participation in the informal economy. Businesses operating within the formal economy, such as restaurants, benefit from the structure of that formality. Rules exist dictating how those businesses should operate and present themselves. Municipal health departments routinely check and certify them with a system of letter grades. They are able to solicit customers openly by promoting their location, hours, and menu through various means, such as websites, television, newspapers, and flyers. Informal street vendors, on the other hand, operate outside of that system and are barred from promoting their businesses through these channels. In spite of this reality, they must still seek out customers, manage their image, and convey their observance of hygienic standards. Fruit vendors must manage their visibility accordingly in order to attract the attention of some (potential customers) while avoiding the attention of others (health inspectors, business owners). *Fruteros* are to a large extent successful in doing this. Their purpose when standing on the street corner is unambiguous. Vendors are not approached and asked for products or services other than those they sell. Their presence does not confound passersby. This chapter examines how potential customers come to know and understand street vendors' purpose, in addition to their symbols and performance; as well as inquiring into the role vendors play in crafting the space that customers navigate.

Any approach to *fruteros* working in disparate parts of the city will yield comparable versions of pushcarts, merchandise, service, and interaction. Fruit vendors have together created and standardized the signs, symbols, language, gestures, and clothing associated with their informal venture. Following the “semiotic axis” model created by Iddo Tavory and Ann Swidler, which they define as a “dimension that delineates one array of possible meanings” within which some action is understood, I identify four axes that fruit vendors use to craft their semiotic space

(2009: 172). These axes include: standardization and recognizability in pushcart presentation, performance of hygiene, solicitation, and familiarity. The first three axes are dependent on interpretations of external signs, while the fourth axis is cultivated across time through interactions between customers and vendors. Each axis spans a range of meanings and can be interpreted as ideal/appropriate at one end, or as problematic/insufficient at the other. Passersby assess vendors based on these axes. Vendors, in turn, attempt to uphold certain standards so as to be perceived in a positive light and be patronized. In the discussion that follows, I show how these semiotic axes allow vendors and passersby to be in dialogue with each other even when there are no direct interactions.

This semiotic perspective provides an explanation for why prospective customers purchase fruit from street vendors in the face of possible health risks. It also shows how *frutereros* themselves create a semiotic space that can be assessed and scrutinized by potential customers leading up to a transaction. Semiotic axes shape the signals that vendors send about themselves and their product, which, in turn, can help them secure customers and a livelihood. However, within this semiotic space, the meanings that fruit vendors wish to convey are not fixed. The vendors' actions and presentation function as a statement within a larger system of signification; customers may code and decode in multiple ways, each leading to different results (e.g. buying, hesitating, scrutinizing, bargaining, rejecting, ignoring).

### ***The Ritual: Preparing a Pushcart for Recognizability***

The semiotic mundaneness of street vending begins with how vendors prepare and present their pushcarts. Standardization is the first semiotic axis that structures the meaning behind a purchase. The challenge for vendors is to present themselves in such a way that they, their product, and their operational model is recognizable and accessible. Vendors should

simultaneously have low entry costs for prospective customers and high entry costs for potential competitors. Customers should know how to interact with vendors and feel comfortable approaching them. If vendors are successful in this regard, their customers will be persuaded to make a purchase by the display, quality, and quantity of product. Likewise, potential competitors should be able to recognize that an investment of money, time, and skill must be made in order to succeed on the streets. How vendors manage this particular kind of impression is linked to their pushcart presentation. For example, the display of peeled and carefully stacked fruits and vegetables behind Plexiglas helps to convey these meanings to customers and competitors.

It will first be useful to review what a vendor packs into his or her pushcart. The tools of the trade include: one or two plastic cutting boards; a sharp knife; a spoon; a peeler; a lime squeezer; plastic gloves; clear plastic bags; and a small, plastic scooping pan. Vendors have standardized their pushcart preparation so that, throughout the city, they engage in a similar ritual of activities every morning. While customers may not know the details behind this preparation ritual, they do see the results, and often base their decision to purchase on how effectively vendors have prepared their cart. Early mornings in fruit vendors' lives are organized around wholesale fruit markets and preparation sites, which are set up either at commissaries (storage warehouses catering to mobile food vendors) or in the backyards of private homes and apartments. The wholesale fruit markets that cater to *fruterios* largely sell only the fruit that they purchase in bulk: watermelons, cantaloupes, honeydew melons, mangoes, papayas, pineapples, cucumbers, oranges, *jicamas*, and limes. In addition, these markets sell bags of ice, plastic forks, large plastic bottles of chili powder, and clear plastic bags.

Fruit vendors organize the contents of their pushcarts with similar items and in similar ways. First, several bags of cubed ice are dumped into the Plexiglas-enclosed display case of the

pushcart. Product must stay and appear fresh; resting it on several pounds of ice ensures this. As the ice must last an entire workday, until the late afternoon, without melting away completely, packing an abundance of ice is necessary. Customers were observed walking away from vendors after they noticed and commented about the fruit not resting on ice. Moreover, vendors place their cutting boards over the crushed ice and beat it down with their fists in order to make the ice settle tightly and evenly at the bottom of their cart's display case. A level platform of ice is an important element in the display of product. Once this has been set up, depending on their vending location and on general customer preferences at that location, vendors will proceed to peel their fruits and vegetables and pack their cart with enough of them to last the day.

A typical pushcart will have peeled watermelons, pineapples, and mangoes pressed up directly against the Plexiglas. These fruits' contrasting colors make for an aesthetically pleasing display. The next inner row of fruit will include items like *jícama*, stacked cantaloupes, honeydew melons, coconuts, and papayas. The middle of the Plexiglas display case will have peeled and unpeeled cucumbers, oranges, and a handful of limes. A box of limes is typically kept beside the cart, and limes are placed in the Plexiglas case as needed.

Although much effort is placed into the street-corner presentation of pushcarts, less effort is invested into the backstage preparation of the cart. In these backstage preparation spaces, efficiency takes precedence over hygienic practices. This contradiction is an intrinsic part of "backstage" place behavior "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman 1959: 112). I often helped vendors prepare pushcarts in the early morning hours. The staging locations were often not commissaries (i.e. storage warehouses that offer preparation space, trash bins, and running water) but backyards where dogs were running around and where roosters might be heard crowing from adjacent

yards. Gloves were rarely used while fruit was handled, and day-old fruit was often washed and re-peeled in an effort to make it appear fresh. The use of the backyard space was an informal and unregulated substitute for the regulated space provided by commissaries. Despite the fact that both Manuel and Carmen's carts had commissary information on them, they did not and had not belonged to one in years—prohibitively high rental rates prevented them from being regular and consistent users of these commissary spaces. The lack of gloves in this backyard space also augmented the importance of the display and symbolic nature of their use in a public, street-corner setting.

Linked to the daily ritual of preparing a pushcart is the performance of certain practices meant to convince passersby to purchase fruit. Despite operating outside of a system of checks and certification processes, fruit vendors' cleanliness is constantly assessed by their would-be customers. The next section explains how vendors perform cleanliness and hygiene for their customers.

### ***The Performance: Personal, Professional, and Symbolic Hygiene***

While the display is meant to attract customers, the way in which the pushcart is organized violates specific health codes. For example, all fruits and vegetables must be stored at 41 degrees Fahrenheit and fruits from the melon family (watermelon, cantaloupe, honeydew melons) are prohibited altogether because they can carry salmonella.<sup>17</sup> Fruit vendors are prohibited from preparing fruit salads on street corners (see Figure 3).<sup>18</sup> Though fruit vendors operate in violation of this and other health code regulations, they still attempt to create a

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<sup>17</sup> Food safety experts are not clear about the exact cause of Salmonella in melons. The source of infection likely occurs during the growth and distribution of the fruit and is not necessarily a consequence of the fruit vendors' preparation.

<sup>18</sup> Fruit vendors are allowed to sell pre-packaged containers of fruit that have been prepared in commissaries. However, vendors complain that these containers do not sell because customers wish to have options.

hygienic establishment for their customers. The performance of hygiene is the second semiotic axis along which vendors craft their semiotic space. Fruit vendors cannot certify their carts and operations completely because of their public-space positioning and the lack of necessary infrastructure (e.g. running water and restroom facilities). The hygienic standards that fruit vendors *do* maintain function as buffers to compensate for this lack of official certification. However, as I will show, the observation of these standards can sometimes backfire. The performance of hygienic practices among vendors—who lack any other visible certification—allows customers to engage in acts of scrutiny before commissioning their services. Performing hygiene serves an important purpose because it helps attract and maintain regular customers. These customers, in turn, keep fruit vendors open for business. On the other hand, some of the markers used in the performance of hygiene also identify vendors to passing LAHD inspectors and LAPD officers.

I identify three categories of hygienic practices among vendors: personal, professional, and symbolic. They are not mutually exclusive, but capture different types of hygiene, some more viable than others. Personal hygiene encompasses those activities in which vendors engage to cleanse themselves or prevent contamination, such as washing their hands, using hand sanitizer, and wearing gloves. Professional hygiene is meant to improve the presentation and appearance of fruit vendors; the use of aprons is one example. Symbolic hygiene includes all the markers and objects that vendors use when setting up on street corners. These objects may or may not be used but their very presence serves an important purpose. The presence of brooms and hand sanitizing lotion or the application of informative stickers on pushcarts are some examples of symbolic hygiene. All three types of hygienic practices lend some form of

legitimacy to an otherwise illegitimate operation. These practices are also transmitted from vendor to vendor during training sessions.

Vendors know that they must perform personal, professional, and symbolic hygiene if they hope to acquire and maintain customers. Personal inspection by discerning customers can lead to or destroy a regular customer base. Vendors often keep cleaning supplies in view to broadcast their hygiene; they also spend time between customers cleaning their cart. Carmen and Cristian each kept a large hand sanitation bottle on top of their carts and a Windex spray bottle on the ground next to their cart. On one occasion when Carmen and Cristian were working together, a little boy with filthy hands ordered a bag of fruit. Carmen took the hand sanitation bottle, leaned over the boy, and asked him to stretch his hands out. In front of another waiting customer Carmen made the boy scrub his hands three times handing him napkins after each time. Cristian, who was preparing the fruit salad as this happened, asked the boy casually, “Were you working?” to which the boy shyly and silently nodded. A middle-aged Latina customer waiting to be served stood back and nodded approvingly of the interaction between the vendors and the child.

On another occasion, as I helped Carmen vend, an Orthodox Jewish man approached and asked Carmen about her knives. Carmen, who does not speak English, asked me to translate. The man asked Carmen if she used the knives for cutting anything besides fruit. Carmen looked puzzled as she shook her head and said, “Only fruit, only fruit, clean, I wash,” in her broken English. The man nodded and ordered a four-dollar bag of fruit. Though the man asked about the knife cleanliness for religious purposes, Carmen interpreted the man’s questions through a health code lens. Because most customers who express hesitation must be won over by the vendor’s

hygienic practices, Carmen immediately made an appeal to the man by saying her utensils were sanitarly clean even though his questions were about kosher cleanliness.

Attempts to broadcast hygienic practices can also have *negative* consequences when they help to identify vendors during crackdowns. The day Jesús was arrested, he had seen the police and health inspectors closing in and had begun to walk away from his pushcart, but had forgotten to remove his apron. Police officers were able to identify and catch him before he travelled far. Nevertheless, vendors continue to wear aprons because this practice visually communicates professional and symbolic hygiene. Because most vendors wear jeans and hooded sweatshirts to work, the apron becomes a type of uniform in the most minimalist sense. Aprons also allow vendors easy access to the large number of bills they handle throughout the day. In the end, the practical and symbolic purposes of the apron outweigh the risk associated with donning it.

Performing hygiene on the street corner serves the purpose of attracting customers and generating income, but LAHD and LAPD officers know that this performance by vendors does not replace actual certification. This performance does not correct the problems related to airborne contaminants or refrigeration. Moreover, constant regulation and inspection by health department officials (of both informal and formal businesses) is an indication that, left to their own devices, many would fall short of the established standards. Vendors are unable to seek normal routes to health certification and therefore engage in informal sanitation and hygienic practices, but these can have both positive and negative consequences. If vendors do not perform hygiene adequately they may lose customers and income, but when they perform hygiene too well, they become more conspicuous to passing LAHD and LAPD officers.

The next practical problem that exists for fruit vendors involves how to reach and develop a customer base. The next section shows how vendors do this and how they carefully



succeed at being noticed without drawing too much attention to themselves. Because their place on the street corner is precarious and can always be called into question, a vendor's behavior in this public setting, first and foremost, must not antagonize. In the following section I review the ways in which vendors attract customers through passive solicitation.

### ***The Invocation: Passive Solicitation***

The majority of fruit vendors are on street corners with no other *fruteros*. The lack of direct competition allows them to set up their pushcarts and wait for customers without aggressively and verbally soliciting them. Instead, they depend on objects to grab the attention of prospective customers and on thoughtful sales practices to convince them to buy. In this way, vendors rely on acts of passive solicitation. Vendors navigate a precarious situation in their acts of passive solicitation; they must draw the attention of the right type of people (potential customers) while avoiding the attention of the wrong type of people (police, health inspectors, store owner competitors).

The primary object that a vendor relies on is a rainbow-colored umbrella that mimics the vibrant colors of their product. Vendors may also paint cornucopias on the sides of their cart or list the names of their business in bright, colorful letters. Others tape religious icons, like a postcard-size image of the Virgin Mary, to the Plexiglas doors of their pushcart. All of these objects become symbols imbued with meaning through interaction. They thus help to draw the attention of passersby for a variety of reasons. Vendors intend for the colorful umbrella to stand out in the drab concrete landscape and to represent an oasis offering fresh fruit salads. Cornucopias connote images of abundance, and their application to the sides of a cart adds an artistic and thoughtful touch. Business information on carts translates into a form of legitimacy. Religious icons display piety and humility that can draw like-minded customers or those who

perceive themselves as Good Samaritans wishing to help a struggling street vendor. The vendor him or herself can also become a symbol for some and bring about expressions of solidarity from customers.

In conversation, Latino immigrant customers sometimes used language expressing solidarity and fellowship with vendors. One late afternoon, a gardener in a soiled green jumpsuit was eating his fruit salad while talking to Manuel. The man had just finished his workday and was saying that “we” (he and the vendor) knew the value of hard work, unlike the “*cholos* [gang members] and *ciudadanos* [immigrants with citizenship] who stole or wanted things handed to them.” This gardener and Manuel did not know each other, yet the man felt comfortable talking at length about the similarities between them, “working all day in yards and on the street.” To this gardener, Manuel, the fruit vendor, represented the same class of working immigrant to which he felt he belonged. This solidarity was expressed in the conversation and, later, cemented with a five-dollar tip from the gardener.

In addition to the objects found around and on their pushcarts and the various symbols that these items come to represent, vendors also rely on thoughtful sales practices in their attempt to passively solicit and secure customers. They offer free samples upon request, rush an order for customers in a hurry, or patiently listen to customers wishing to converse casually. Among the more subtle ways in which vendors attempt to secure a customer is by giving away of samples of fruit. This is unlike the free and *unsolicited* samples that are distributed by some companies in an effort to aggressively attract customers. It is common for hesitant, would-be customers to approach vendors with questions about the ripeness of a given fruit. In these instances, in an effort to lock down a customer, vendors will often give away a small sample of the fruit in question.

One afternoon, as José was standing by his cart waiting for customers, an older Latina woman approached asking about the softness of his coconut. She was mid-way through a sentence explaining that her dentures did not allow her to eat things that were too hard or chewy, when José sliced a piece of his most tender coconut and offered it to her with a gloved hand. She stopped short, took the piece and said, “ay, gracias” in a quiet thankful manner. While chewing she nodded her approval and José took out his cutting board to prepare for her order.

I observed all vendors giving free samples to customers inquiring about one item or another. José, a very taciturn young man, did not have extended conversations with many of his customers and had told me on several occasions that he disliked it when customers asked him questions. As he noted, “they [customers] always ask the same things: How long are you here? How is business? Do cops give you a hard time? Where do you go to the restroom? [laughs] All the questions you asked when you met me!” Our prolonged interactions outside of the street-corner vending location had allowed me to understand José’s more private and quiet manner while at his post. When the woman above approached offering an excuse for her unspoken request for a sample, José immediately acquiesced in an effort to secure her as a customer, keep her from talking at length, and dispatch her quickly. Even though these were his private motivations, his public actions nonetheless allowed him to appear as a receptive vendor catering to a customer’s wishes.

Passive solicitation through a reliance on objects-turned-symbols and thoughtful practices is the third axis of the semiotic space that vendors craft. This axis, like the others, has a range of meaning and possible interpretations. Vendors would like to believe that they attract customers, but they can never know the range of possible interpretations. As noted earlier, the meaning conveyed by vendors, their pushcarts, and product is not fixed; potential customers rely on

intersecting structures of meaning to make their decisions. Still, vendors use their umbrellas even while standing under the shade of a tree; they decorate their carts; and they display their religious icons for personal reasons. When these symbols produce results, vendors may attribute them to divine providence or to a successful business strategy.

The next and final section shows how, in the communal stage of this process, passersby transition from being observers to being customers and beyond. Familiarization is the fourth and final axis of the semiotic space that vendors craft.

### ***The Communal: Becoming A Customer, Patron, and Connoisseur***

Vendors attempt to create a street-side business with low entrance costs in an effort to convince passersby to approach without confusion, fear, or hesitation. At the same time, they want the costs to be high enough that they are not overrun with competitors. In the previous sections, I showed how vendors craft the semiotic space that passersby navigate: vendors carefully prepare their pushcarts, perform hygiene, and passively solicit customers. Here, I show how passersby transition into customers, patrons, and connoisseurs. The movement through these roles is not one that occurs in a vacuum. Instead, information accumulated through interactions with vendors and other customers allows them to generate the knowledge and experience necessary to transition from one role into another. I analyze the career, that is the “person’s sequence of role and realized status and office,” in the avocation of fruit-salad customer (Hughes 1937: 404).<sup>19</sup> This career includes passing through a series of statuses in a sequence of achievement.

The career I assess, relatively speaking, is a short one, but it does entail movement through time. As Hughes noted, “a career consists, in one sense, of moving—in time and hence with age—within the institutional system in which the occupation exists...a man can make

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<sup>19</sup> Hughes notes “it is possible to have a career in an avocation as well as a vocation” (1937: 411).

progress in a number of ways. He may become more skillful at the basic activities of the occupation; the increase of skill may be rewarded by an increase of...prestige among his fellows” (Hughes 1984: 296). Prior to entering into this career, individuals are merely passersby. These uninitiated observers may recognize vendors and their function, but they will never have interacted with them or purchased anything from them. They begin to transition into customers through inquisitive interactions with vendors or other customers. These passersby will approach the vender to ask about prices and options, or about the quality of the fruit. One morning, I stood silently by Manuel eating a fruit salad that he had prepared for me, while he was crouched down pulling a box of limes out from under his pushcart. A middle-aged white woman walking by saw me and said, “That looks good. How’s the fruit here? Is it fresh?” I had a mouthful of fruit and nodded while smiling. The woman waited for Manuel to stand up, asked him how much the fruit salads cost, and then ordered. She likely perceived me to be an objective consumer and used my silent smiling nod as endorsement to transition from passerby into customer. Typically, fruit salads are sold in three, four, and five-dollar bags. Customers can select the size and corresponding price of their bag, choice of fruits and vegetables, and their desired garnish (lime juice, salt, chili powder). Customers may include one-time visitors who will never purchase fruit from a street vendor again. However, they are no longer the uninitiated. Customers are familiar, at the very least, with pricing and procedure.

Customers, who continue to buy fruit salads, whether from the same vendor or different ones, transition into patrons. Patrons can begin to distinguish the quality of fruit across different vendors and seasons. Patrons include people who purchase fruit with regularity and perhaps consume it as part of a weekly lunch ritual. They will gather more information through repeated interactions with vendors or other customers. One afternoon, a middle-aged white woman stood

in line behind a middle-aged Latina while Ricardo prepared the Latina woman's fruit salad. The white woman had a small clutch handbag and was holding it close to her midsection with both hands while leaning in towards the Latina customer in front of her. In a whisper, the white woman asked the Latina what fruit the vendor was cutting. The Latina turned around and said, "Jicama," and then proceeded to explain its taste and texture. The interaction concluded when the white woman exclaimed, "Ooh, I want that!" The white woman had purchased fruit before, but had only ordered watermelon and mango—fruits with which she was familiar. This visit allowed her to expand the range of desirable options available to her.

Patrons likewise learn what requests are unacceptable. For example, vendors do not sell for less than three dollars because it is not cost-effective for them. They will turn away customers asking for a one-dollar bag of fruit because they lose income in "giving away" the clear plastic bag in which the fruit is packed. Most vendors use the same size of clear plastic bags for all orders because they are purchased from the same wholesale market. What is more, because one vendor trains the next, they can standardize the portions they serve internally. However, because some patrons will buy from fruit vendors in different areas, patrons also help to standardize the cost and portions of fruit salads. Patrons to specific vendors may also receive specialized treatment as a reward for their loyalty and to keep them coming back. On one occasion, Carmen was making a large portion of fruit salad for one of her regular patrons, a Latina nanny who worked in the neighborhood. As Carmen was preparing it, a middle-aged African-American woman looked on and exclaimed, "She [Carmen] is *hooking* it up! Go on girl!" referring to both the speed with which Carmen was working and the large pieces of the fruit she was chopping. The woman proceeded to ask the Latina nanny why she added lime to the fruit salad and the nanny responded by saying it conserved the fruit for a longer period. When the

African American woman's turn came, she pointed to the previous fruit salad and said, "Just like that, whatever price that was." Carmen was then compelled to make another large fruit salad and sell it for four dollars instead of the five she would have normally charged. While the Latina nanny was a patron and the African-American woman was merely a customer, Carmen was compelled to treat them both equally and according to the higher standard. In the end, the African-American woman told Carmen she was going to return to her corner for her fruit salads and she did. The woman visited Carmen at least once a week afterwards and on one occasion brought a friend and commented, "She hooks it up," as she walked up to Carmen and ordered. A few times after that occasion, I observed both of these women buying fruit from Carmen during their lunch hour. This woman passed through the career stages quickly and went from uninitiated passerby to customer and patron in a matter of weeks.

In some cases, meaningful relationships with customers emerge from the little niceties that occur after multiple interactions. In these cases, vendors use accumulated information to establish as well as maintain friendships and, by default, regular patrons. Building a cadre of patrons is ideal for vendors who can come to rely on certain individuals to buy fruit with some consistency. A vendor's steady and reliable presence on the street corner facilitates the creation of these patrons. A patron for Carmen came in the form of a neighborhood man with children who turned out to be a widower. One afternoon, a man walked by and nodded hello to Carmen. She knew the man and asked where his young daughters were that day. The man responded stating they were at home. After he was out of earshot, she told me that his wife had passed away after the birth of their third daughter and that he had raised three little girls on his own. Carmen had gathered this information through an uncomfortable interaction. Once, when he was purchasing fruit, Carmen casually asked him if he was a divorcé because she always saw him

alone with his daughters. He said no and mentioned that his wife had passed away; Carmen recalled how ashamed she was for inquiring about his marital status. However, this interaction and the information disclosed was the foundation of their cordial friendship. The two regularly chatted politely when they saw each other on the street. Carmen routinely gave this man more fruit when he ordered and instructed me to do the same

Manuel, who worked for some time in front of a small hospital, counted his set of patrons among the hospital's employees. Every weekday at lunchtime, a group of three to four nurses would approach Manuel and buy fruit. The women would often chat with each other while waiting in line. They would talk about work relationships and complain about joint aches and pains they had from standing. Though Manuel did not interact much with the women beyond taking their orders, the women would use the space around the pushcart to debrief each other about work in a non-work "break" setting. Sometimes the women would linger outside eating their fruit near the shade provided by Manuel's colorful umbrella and begrudgingly head back after a few minutes.

For various types of workers, buying fruit from vendors presented a type of respite from the workday. Office workers appreciated being outside and stretching their legs and made comments to that effect. Blue-collar workers like gardeners, construction workers, and maintenance men would approach and take time to wipe the sweat from their brows or the grease from their hands while waiting for their fruit salads. In the evening bike commuters and joggers would replenish with a bag of fruit or of coconut water. In this way, fruit vendors provided a treat, so to speak, for patrons with their product, and their place on the street corner came to represent an oasis in the urban landscape.



Patrons, with their accumulated knowledge and experience, transition into connoisseurs. Connoisseurs have a more nuanced perception of vendors, their product, and pricing. While vendors appreciate customers and patrons, connoisseurs can sometimes become difficult to service. Because of their knowledge and experience, connoisseurs are likely to be critical when vendors fail to act or service them in accordance with what they know to be standard routine. On several occasions connoisseur customers were heard saying things like, “I bought a three-dollar bag from a vendor downtown, and he gave me more than this.” If the customer is insistent, fruit vendors will sometimes add more fruit to the bag to appease the customer. However, on more than one occasion I heard vendors muttering retorts like Ricardo’s: “Buy your fruit there next time, then.” Vendors are inclined to make smaller fruit salads when they are running low on money and product. On these occasions, more so than others, they make each fruit salad they sell count. When vendors are stretched thin economically, as Ricardo was at the time, they are less inclined to be receptive to connoisseur customer remarks about the way another vendor portioned their product.

In more affluent neighborhoods, and on occasions where vendors want to sell more fruit quickly, they will offer only four-dollar and five-dollar bags. In more working-class neighborhoods, however, this kind of pricing would not be accepted, and complaints would likely be heard from connoisseur customers accustomed to three-dollar bags of fruit. If a vendor begins selling cheaper bags (\$1.00-\$2.00) they are quickly and collectively discouraged from doing so by the larger community of fruit vendors who will, inevitably, be visited on their own corners by these connoisseur customers asking for a cheaper bag of fruit.

Throughout the day, vendors’ supply of fruit dwindles, a factor that can also affect the interactions that they have with these connoisseur customers. When vendors have a day of good

sales, they might run low on product in the afternoon (see Figure 4). Though vendors are pleased on these days, connoisseurs often reproach them for failing to stock and prepare their pushcarts adequately. These comments from connoisseur customers make vendors uncomfortable.

**Field notes:** A middle-aged black woman and a little boy approach the pushcart. The little boy is telling her that he wants *jícama*. She notes, perhaps to herself but relatively loudly, that Daniel has very little fruit. She gets up close to the Plexiglas and lifts her sunglasses to get a better look and then lets her glasses drop back on the bridge of her nose. She turns away. They walk towards some vending machines and Daniel thinks he's lost a customer and comes back to my side of the cart to chat. Before long, the woman returns. With a raised voice and in English the woman orders what she wants. She gets her bag quickly and asks Daniel, in a scolding tone, if he's going to be back the next day with *more* fruit (her emphasis). Daniel says yes. She walks away. Within a few minutes another customer approaches, sees the lack of fruit, and walks away. Daniel tells me he doesn't want to be there anymore because everyone complains about the lack of fruit. Just as he is saying that another person walks up and laments the lack of fruit and Daniel gives me his "I told you so" glance. The only things left on the ice are coconut, *jícama* and cucumber. Daniel looks at his watch and says, "I hope they pick me up soon, no one is going to want what I have left."

Daniel felt uncomfortable for being reproached and judged by connoisseur customers when his product ran low. He and other vendors all mentioned being bothered by customers who chastised them about their inventory. Vendors often interpreted the reproach through a business owner's lens and felt that they were being criticized for having a faulty business model. However, selling out of product is typically a good thing, not only for vendors, but also for subsequent customers. A vending location that is not profitable will not only limit the income from sales for that day but might also cause vendors to throw out their product (and lose money) or encourage them to re-peel and subsequently attempt to re-sell the fruit and vegetables. Aged, day-old fruit can not only make customers sick, but it also tends to look and smell less appetizing, a factor that then further stymies sales. Despite this, negative remarks from connoisseur customers always came on days when fruit ran low, and vendors would often complain to me, as Daniel did, that "no one was forcing them to buy."

The uninitiated passerby can begin a career as a customer only after the initial purchase. Not all individuals who purchase fruit progress through the various roles reviewed here, just as not all people engaged in an occupation move forward in their careers. However, those who do acquire a nuanced understanding as customers can move forward and become patrons. Among the patrons, those who develop the ability to criticize based on a body of accumulated knowledge move on to become connoisseurs. While vendors appreciate customers and patrons, servicing connoisseurs can become difficult because, as much information as connoisseurs have, they always lack the first-hand experience that fruit vendors live out in their daily work lives.

### ***Conclusion***

When people approach fruit vendors they do not ask for *tamales*, *paletas*, or for a shoe shining. To most customers, it is obvious what *frutereros* sell and how the transaction should take place. There are very few interactional frictions in the working life of a fruit vendor. The mundaneness of this process is an “accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary artful ways of that accomplishment being by members known, used, and taken for granted” (Garfinkel 1967: vii). Mundaneness is constructed by vendors; they do so from within the informal sector to mimic similar processes in the formal sector. Because of their informal economy status, when crafting this semiotic space, vendors must be careful to attract the right type of attention while being constantly vigilant of attracting the wrong type of attention. In the end, the mundane process of making the sale is carefully crafted for predictability, approachability, and recognizability. Standardization and recognizability in pushcart presentation, performance of hygiene, passive solicitation, and familiarity are the four axes along which vendors craft a semiotic space. The first three axes involve street corner presentation. The fourth, familiarization, is the trajectory along which individuals travel in their interactive journey

with vendors so that, with time and experience, passersby can become customers, patrons, and perhaps even connoisseurs. Passersby can interpret this semiotic space in dissimilar ways; but it is the hope of vendors to be perceived as appropriate, approachable and unproblematic. It is the goal of fruit vendors to uphold certain standards so as to be successful in their endeavor to make a sale.

**Figure 3. Fruit salad preparation**



Source: Photo taken by author.

**Figure 4. Pushcart at the end of a busy workday**



Source: Photo taken by author.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SURVIVAL STRATEGIES, ECONOMIC MOBILITY, AND COMMUNITY

Through the years, fruit vendors' collective experience has led to improved business tactics that contributed to the proliferation of vending. I estimate that over 1,000 fruit vendors operate within Los Angeles County.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, strict anti-vending ordinances and county-initiated crackdowns are a perpetual risk to vendors, whose right to livelihoods and public presence are continuously contested. Concomitant with fruit vendors' increased numbers is a pushback—or systematic resistance—on the part of local government (Light 2006: 8). In this context, fruit vendors have implemented coping mechanisms that allow for short-term survival, and even sporadic seasons of plenty, but not long-term upward mobility. This chapter examines these survival strategies and the interrelated struggles to balance income generation and risk in light of street vendors' proscribed circumstances. I argue that, unlike for other immigrant informal workers, the regulatory backlash creates a pattern of financial vulnerability for fruit vendors. However, these crackdowns and the financial vulnerability that results, are not sufficient to deflect new migrants within the fruit vendor network to other cities, nor do they divert struggling fruit vendors to other, safer, occupations. Within such a context, the survival strategies that allow vendors to operate additionally function to create community.

The presence of fruit vendors on street corners throughout Los Angeles represents a confluence of larger social and economic forces. The vendors are labor migrants who have crossed international borders in search of improved economic opportunities, but because they are undocumented, they confront exclusionary mechanisms that prevent them from legally

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<sup>20</sup> The author and two fruit vendors made informal counts. These included street-based observation down major Los Angeles thoroughfares as well as commissary (i.e. pushcart storage locations) counts.

participating in the formal economy. Not only are they relegated to the informal sector, but they also take part in labor migration operations that facilitate entry into the occupation, further provoking its expansion (Rosales Forthcoming). Within Los Angeles, Ivan Light (2006) has documented how local government has disrupted unwanted immigration by enforcing anti-poverty legislation. Enforcement targets activities that include “sweatshops where low-paid work violates wages, health, and safety regulations and slums that violate municipal housing ordinances” (Light 2006: 10). Although Light focuses on immigrant workers operating in the wage economy, the local quality-of-life policies and enforcement activities that he investigates also heavily target street-based workers like fruit vendors. Included in these enforcement activities are crackdowns on fruit vendors carried out by the Los Angeles Health Department (LAHD) and Police Department (LAPD), which target vendors that operate in violation of city and county ordinances that regulate sidewalk activity as well as public health and safety.

Light argues that this local political intolerance of immigrant poverty prompted crackdowns that in turn contributed to the deflection of immigrants to other US cities. But what about the immigrants who remained behind and those who continued to arrive? Many undocumented workers operating within the informal sector persisted in the midst of this local government assault, among them day laborers, gardeners, domestic workers, and fruit vendors. These immigrant workers would be susceptible to local anti-poverty legislation. However, the experience for fruit vendors differs from these other informal workers. While Light argues that poverty intolerance provoked the crackdowns, I argue that the crackdowns themselves contributed to and perpetuated poverty and marginalization among fruit vendors.

This chapter examines four survival strategies that vendors employ in response to these crackdowns. The first of these survival strategies functions as a safety net while the others are



risk-averse, street-level practices that reduce but do not remove threat, and that often force a trade-off between risk and income generation. The term “survival” takes on a multifaceted meaning that speaks to vendors’ maneuvering through the streets of Los Angeles, within the American informal labor sector, and inside a country where they lack both citizenship and viable paths to citizenship. I argue that fruit vending, with its inherent risks and corresponding limited-range survival strategies, creates a cycle of poverty marked by limited gains and periodic losses. Because risk cannot be eliminated due to the informal and illicit nature of the work, the crackdowns that do occur are devastating not only for the fruit vendor who experiences them, but also for the network to which he or she belongs. It is unknown whether these vendors ever amass the savings necessary to move into more traditional brick and mortar storefronts—this study is not longitudinal in nature, though this upward mobility is a distinct possibility. My sample includes vendors who are fairly recent arrivals, the majority of whom are undocumented and cannot establish a formal business legally. Low income, high debt, and minimal to non-existent upward mobility are common fare among fruit vendors. Despite this, fruit vendors remain on the job in part because the survival strategies that they employ help to create group cohesion and build community.

### ***Latino Immigrants and Mobility in the Informal Sector***

By definition, activities in the informal sector escape regulation and therefore measured observation. And though Saskia Sassen stated that “the expansion of informalization does not, in principle, depend on the existence of an immigrant labor force,” it nevertheless consists of a large documented and undocumented immigrant population within Los Angeles (1998: 158). Researchers have examined various populations of immigrant workers operating within the informal sector such as the social and economic worlds of suburban maintenance gardeners

(Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009), day laborers (Malpica 2002; Valenzuela Jr. 2003), and domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 1992). Fruit vendors are demographically similar to these other populations of workers: most are first-generation Latino undocumented immigrants with low levels of schooling, limited occupational skills, limited to no English fluency, and little economic capital. But unlike these other immigrant informal workers, who may experience weak but noticeable upward economic mobility, fruit vendors' trajectories are far bleaker.

Among the scholars who offer optimistic outlooks for immigrant informal workers are Hernan Ramirez and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo who classified suburban maintenance gardeners as “worker-entrepreneurs” (2009: 74). For these worker-entrepreneurs the occupation of suburban maintenance gardening offers mobility and, for a select few, financial solvency. While the authors recognize that upward mobility in an occupation that employs workers with primary school educations and limited English fluency is uncommon, they note “there is occupational differentiation and mobility within the occupation, and this mobility track leads towards economic formality and higher earnings” including the rare but documented possibility of six figure incomes (Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009: 85). Other scholars studying gardeners in Los Angeles (Huerta 2008) and South Texas (Pisani and Yoskowitz 2006) made similar claims about upward mobility within this informal sector occupation. Pisani and Yoskowitz state that self-employed gardeners in South Texas “improved their life chances” and could earn 1.7 times the legal minimum wage (2006: 59).

Abel Valenzuela also challenges popular perceptions of day labor work by arguing that it is more than “a desperate attempt at securing employment in a public setting” (2001: 336). Valenzuela provides an alternative perspective in which day labor work offers autonomy, choice,

and improved wages for a largely undocumented population operating in an exclusionary labor market. For the day laborers of Valenzuela's study, day labor is work unlike that found in the wage economy, which is largely characterized as low-wage and dead-end. Day labor not only provides comparable or better wages, but also offers autonomy and the possibility for upward mobility. Daniel Malpica (2002), who also studied day laborers, offers a more tempered argument with regard to mobility. He notes that day labor provides some undocumented immigrants their first job in the country and gives them a foothold in the urban economy; for others, day labor work provides income while temporarily unemployed from a regular job elsewhere. Day labor is therefore a transitional occupation, offering little stability and mobility. The economic risks for day laborers, in this instance, are due to employers' refusal to pay a laborer at the end of the workday or to the laborer's inability to find gainful employment.

Domestic work is an informal activity that includes many Latina immigrants; among Salvadoran and Guatemalan women in the Los Angeles area, domestic service and childcare are the major sources of employment (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Lopez, Popkin, and Telles 1996). In her study of paid domestic workers, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) suggests that mobility within the occupation exists and is governed by networks. As experience and informational resources expand, the opportunity for more employment presents itself; more house-cleaning work generates more income. Writing about Chicana domestics, Mary Romero (1987) observed that limited job skills constrained these women's job prospects, funneling them into this occupation. For Romero's population, the occupation of domestic work provides autonomy and stability but not upward mobility. Within the job, "the experience did not improve their life chances in the labor market or qualify them for better jobs...the interaction [between employees

and employers] never resulted in the inclusion of the domestic into another or broader social network that might have provided new job opportunities” (Romero 1987: 217).

These studies of informal immigrant workers showcase two important patterns that apply to fruit vendors as well. First, these workers are constrained by some social characteristic (e.g. legal status, education, experience, language) that pushes or pulls them towards informal work. Second, these workers come to believe, appropriately or not, that their informal work is different *and* preferable to formal wage economy labor. For gardeners, co-workers or bosses earning six-figure salaries function as proof—even though such income may be the exception rather than the rule. For other workers, the idea of economic improvement through informal self-employment is an iteration of the American Dream. Immigrants may be more inclined to hold this belief because their very migration is contingent on the idea that jobs and incomes are plentiful in the United States. As Chavez (1992) has noted, viable economic links to American society are key considerations for coming to and remaining in the United States. And while none of these studies present an uncritical celebration of informality, these scholars are overwhelmingly positive in their assessments of immigrants and their informal work. As Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo write, “[the gardening occupation] offers otherwise disadvantaged immigrant workers the possibility to use their ingenuity and hard work to innovate opportunity” (2009: 86).

*Fruterros* operate in a space created by economic restructuring and globalization effects (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Sassen 1990; Sassen 1993), ethnic entrepreneurship (Light and Rosenstein 1995; Zhou 2004), and immigrant strategies imported from sending countries (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). Vendors attribute the origins of fruit vending to a migrant who worked as a fruit vendor in the Mexican state of Puebla before working as a fruit vendor in Los

Angeles. This Mexican entrepreneur immigrated to the United States sometime in the 1980s.<sup>21</sup> While he employed only his family in the business, his fellow *paisanos* [hometown associates] emulated the business model. In the hands of these *paisanos*, fruit vending became an “immigrant niche” occupation filled largely by *Poblanos*—individuals from the Mexican state of Puebla (Waldinger 1994: 3). The same kinship and *paisano* networks that facilitated entry also created “social closure” contributing to a more concentrated immigrant niche (Waldinger and Lichter 2003: 87). However, no other ethnic or native populations were displaced in this process because fruit vending, as it was practiced, did not exist previously. The Mexican immigrant enclave economy found in the Los Angeles wholesale produce market may also have helped bolster this fruit vending immigrant niche (Alvarez Jr. 1990).

Meanwhile, economic restructuring reconfigured income distribution in the United States so that an increasing population of low-income customers began seeking cheaper goods from the informal sector (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Sassen 1990). Fruit vendors were able to provide a cheap product by decreasing the distance between wholesale retailers and customers and by minimizing overhead costs. Because the product (fruit salads) had widespread appeal and because fruit vendors were easily accessible working on public sidewalks, the customer base quickly expanded beyond the initial “captive market” found in the low-income, immigrant community (Rath and Kloosterman 2000: 660). Even without this expanded customer base, “immigrant replenishment” might have provided ample customers for fruit vendors (Jimenez 2008: 1533). As Alvarez noted, “the continuing growth of the Mexican population [increases]...the ‘built-in’ market for Mexican commodities” (Alvarez Jr. 1990: 107).

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<sup>21</sup> Many of the vendors in my study mentioned him by name but I was unable to interview him personally because he was serving time in prison for a domestic violence incident.

Throughout the period of its growth, opposition to this highly visible informal sector business has been present and growing as well. As Light (2006) has noted, concentrations of undocumented immigrants in particular occupations ignites reactionary measures or increased enforcement of restrictive measures that are poverty-intolerant and disproportionately affect urban poor immigrants. Since 1926, Los Angeles County has had one of the most restrictive anti-street vending ordinances in the country (Fujimoto and Janis 1990; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). While attempts were made in the early 1990s to ease this ordinance, it remains largely unchanged and is continuously enforced by officials in the LAHD and LAPD. Some scholars have even noted that following the legislation meant to ease vending restrictions, crackdowns actually increased. Hamilton and Chinchilla (2001) noted that in 1993 there were 952 citations issued during the entire year, whereas in a five-month period in 1994 over 800 citations had already been issued.

The punitive measures fruit vendors face vary, in increasing severity they may: 1) receive a warning and be told to leave an area; 2) be issued a ticket by the LAPD and/or LAHD; 3) have their fruit, cutting boards and knives destroyed/confiscated; 4) have their pushcart impounded and issued a citation; 5) have their product and pushcart destroyed on site with a roving trash compactor; 6) have their product and pushcart impounded or destroyed, issued a citation, and be arrested. All of the vendors in my study have experienced at least one of these measures. This case study casts a dark shadow on the nature of immigrant informal sector work. Anti-vending ordinances and their prolonged enforcement undermine vendors' attempts to advance financially and establish a stable economic presence in the United States.

Stagnant wages and downward mobility are common among fruit vendors. Why is this so? Fruit vendors occupy the same precarious position, both within the United States and its

labor market, as the other informal workers described above. Their presence in the United States as undocumented immigrants, or “illegal aliens” as the state defines them, “affirms their status as outside the ‘legal’ system that constitutes society [while] ‘alien’ affirms their status as outsiders” (Chavez 1990: 32). Their participation in the informal sector, which encapsulates the “production and sale of goods and services that are licit but produced and sold outside the regulatory apparatus,” further augments their outsider status (Sassen-Koob 1989: 1006). Both of these markers—undocumented and informal—open the possibility for state-sponsored retribution in the form of deportation, arrest, confiscation of vending materials, and citation. The fact that street vending is an illicit activity in Los Angeles creates another layer of vulnerability. Not only is street vending prohibited, but also two bureaucratic agencies—the Los Angeles Health Department (LAHD) and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)—are charged with continuously and effectively enforcing the prohibition. It is important to note that fruit vendors engage in prohibited activity, but it is a “soft” illegality that falls within the misdemeanor realm, punishable by fines and minimal jail time.<sup>22</sup> Thus, LAHD sweeps are more commonplace than joint LAHD and LAPD sweeps, but joint sweeps can include more severe punishment (e.g. arrest). Fruit vendors’ illicit work and the constant threat of LAHD and LAPD crackdowns co-exist with their occupation-driven need to maintain a public presence.

Vendors working on street corners *magnify* their outsider markers (undocumented and informal) because they are highly visible in the urban landscape. Their public space positioning is unlike that of day laborers’ whose right to seek work at informal, street-corner, hiring sites is protected by the First Amendment (Campbell 2009). Meanwhile, domestic workers and gardeners are hidden in private sphere locations where their presence is not as conspicuous or

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<sup>22</sup> “Soft illegality” also alludes to the unwillingness of the LAPD to strictly enforce the rule of law in contexts where the rule breaker is perceived (by LAPD officers and the public in general) to be hard working and not a hardened criminal.

where it is “institutionally incorporated” into mainstream suburban society (Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009: 75). Gardeners, domestic workers, and day laborers also tend to service more affluent populations. Law enforcement is less likely to target the locations where these workers are employed due to the power and influence that the employers may yield. Fruit vendors working on street corners in low and middle class neighborhoods do not operate under the auspices of any vigilant employer and often service less affluent customers. This chapter thus addresses the distinct obstacles that fruit vendors confront on the streets of Los Angeles and within the informal labor sector and the consequences and benefits linked to those obstacles.

### ***Survival Strategies***

*Fruteros* are liminally suspended in a space where they can neither formalize their business nor their presence but must continue to practice their trade publicly to subsist. The social mechanisms that create this liminality are also responsible for the effects it generates. As Gross noted, “[social mechanisms] are best thought of as chains or aggregations of problem situations and the effects that ensue as a result of the habits actors use to resolve them” (2009: 375). In this instance, the habits used to resolve problem situations are the survival strategies implemented by vendors seeking to recover from a financially devastating local government crackdown or to increase sales and decrease risk. Unfortunately, the survival strategies employed, while they represent a response to the crackdowns, also contribute to the continuation of crackdowns. Successful strategies that allow vendors to operate and profit are often accompanied by crackdowns meant to limit their operations and minimize profitability. Evasion tactics on the part of vendors also serve to justify the furtive methods employed by the LAHD and LAPD to apprehend them.



The most important survival strategy *fruteros* employ is a dependence on the human and capital resources found in kinship and *paisano* networks. These networks function as safety nets for vendors, but as I will show they are often limited and overburdened. In an effort to ease the burden imposed on these social networks, fruit vendors also employ street-level, risk-averse survival strategies meant to aid in evasion and/or increase income generation. These strategies emerge in response to vendors' liminal position and include: street patrols and alerts; geographical positioning and alliance building; and turning threats into resources. Often these street-level survival strategies mimic characteristics of the formal, regulated economy in order to increase profit and/or minimize risk, although often a trade-off must be made between the two. These three survival strategies have limited range and do not diminish the larger systemic problem related to street vendor criminalization. If, and mostly likely when, these street-level strategies fail, vendors revert to a reliance on kinship and *paisano* networks. In the end, all four strategies promote short-term survival but fail to bolster long-term upward mobility. However, these survival strategies unite vendors in a common struggle. The strategies and their effectiveness are transmitted from vendor to vendor to both inform and create community.

### ***Kinship and Paisano Networks***

Vendors rely on kinship and *paisano* networks for many reasons. These networks facilitate entry into the business, provide loans to buy pushcarts, create distribution channels between the wholesale fruit market and preparation sites, allow for collective drop-offs and pick-ups, and provide money to bail vendors out from jail, pay citation fines, or fund re-entry after deportation. The most important purpose they serve is to provide a safety net for vendors experiencing financial hardship following a crackdown.

Kinship and *paisano* networks are often the only financial safety net that vendors have at their disposal. Ricardo was able to secure a loan of \$1,000.00 from his cousins to buy a new cart after the health department confiscated his old cart. Fifteen days later, when it was confiscated again, he asked for another loan and bought yet another cart. When this cart was also confiscated, Ricardo's cousin hired him to work using a borrowed cart. Ricardo did not want to accumulate any more debt and worked on paying off the two loans instead of asking for more money. During this time, Ricardo was living with several cousins who helped him with his day-to-day expenses while he regained his footing. Financial problems brought on by crackdowns were not uncommon for Ricardo's cousins. Ten of them lived together and were witness to each other's ups and downs. Financial strain was dealt with as a group within this household of vendors.

Jesús' cousin, who was also his first boss, bailed him out of jail the second time he was arrested—a \$200.00 expense. The first time he was arrested, however, the network of vendors he belonged to was undergoing financial hardship and could not afford to bail him out. At the time Jesús had been in the United States for only two months. He recalled the time he served as one of the most difficult periods of his life; he neither slept nor ate the two nights he spent in jail. The evening he was released, he was unable to recover his belongings, including his wallet. He recalled with much chagrin the irony of coming to this country to work and make money only to end up in jail and later on the streets begging for change:

We [Jesús and other vendors] were released [from jail] at 6:30 in the evening. I wasn't able to collect my personal belongings because it was late... I half remembered the telephone number for the house. So I went out and, being new to LA, I didn't even know which bus I could take to bring me here. I didn't know what to do. I began asking for money on the street so that I could call the house. They [other vendors] were embarrassed to ask girls [for money]. I would ask guys and they'd be rude in responding: "How about you get a job?! You lazy shit, asking for money on the street!" And I'd ask the women, but nothing... I spent an hour trying to get fifty cents.

Other vendors had similar confrontations with unfortunate circumstances. Maria Leticia had plenty of family members, some with legal residency, living in Los Angeles. When she lost her job as a garment worker she got a job from her sister as a fruit vendor. “[I started vending] because, well [chuckles] I think we all began out of necessity, out of wanting to make some bucks.” Following a dispute with her husband and the loss of the apartment they shared, Maria Leticia lost custody of her eight children who all went to live with different family members. Maria Leticia went to live with her fruit vendor cousin, Carmen, and three other *fruteros*. During this time, Maria Leticia slept on the living room floor and largely depended on Carmen and the other vendors to cover her meals and personal expenses while she saved money. The other vendors were able to take turns shuttling Maria Leticia to and from work. However, after a few months and following a crackdown in which Carmen’s cart was taken away, Maria Leticia moved in with another vendor—a man she had begun dating. After Maria Leticia’s departure, Carmen admitted to me that having her cousin live with her was a financial burden. As Carmen stated, “You can’t kick family out into the street. You just stand it.” While Maria Leticia was glad to have the job and the ability to save some money, she did not want to be a fruit vendor because of the risks:

I want to start a restaurant or, if they take me, cleaning houses. That’s what I want to do. Because, well, with the pushcart they’ll move you, or the city busts you, or they throw out your fruit, take away your cart. It’s very risky. What’s more, sometimes it happens that they just throw away the fruit, but sometimes they also take *you* away [speaker’s emphasis].

While Maria Leticia wished for a different type of job, a saturated labor market prevented her from securing it. She was unable to keep her garment factory job and did not belong to any network of domestic workers. Instead, her familial network was firmly rooted in the fruit

vending business and she was able to exploit these connections for income and assistance in times of need.

The dependence on peers helps to counteract the negative effects of crackdowns and financial hardship. The risks tied to fruit vending are greatly diminished because of kinship and *paisano* networks; in fact, some vendors argue that this occupation could not be performed successfully were it not for a heavy reliance on social networks. Financial bailouts offered by social network peers allow vendors to get back to work but vendors' reappearance often prompts the LAHD and LAPD to renew its efforts and conduct crackdowns again.

The bounded nature of kinship and *paisano* networks means that if one vendor suffers financial hardship it will weigh heavily on all the vendors in the network; this is the trap of social networks (Stack 1974). Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) offered a similar argument about the enabling and constraining effects of social networks in her study of paid domestic workers. While social networks may ease financial hardship by distributing it over many shoulders, the web of reciprocal obligations impedes individual and collective upward economic mobility. However the ability to offer help, as well as to seek it, strengthens the ties between network members.

In an effort to ease the burden on these networks, fruit vendors also engage in daily, street-level, risk reduction strategies. These strategies are meant to aid in evasion and/or to improve income generation, though these two goals are often at odds with one another.

### ***Street Patrols and Alerts***

Vendors use informal patrol and alert systems on the streets in order to relay information about ongoing crackdowns. This information is diffused through the use of cell phones or in drive-by warning shouts or whistles. These warnings provide real-time information about the

location and route health inspectors and police are taking during crackdowns. On one occasion, as I chatted with a vendor, a man in a black pick-up truck drove by and whistled to him. Daniel, the vendor, immediately shoved his box of trash behind a shrub, took down his umbrella and pushed the cart into an alleyway behind a dumpster. After this, we sat on a bus stop bench chatting until the man with the pick-up truck drove by again signaling that the coast was clear. The driver in the pick-up truck was the vendor's brother-in-law and the owner of the cart he was using. He had been following the health inspectors at a distance, tracking their movements and giving warnings to fruit vendors in the area.

Accurate information about ongoing crackdowns can maximize the amount of time a vendor stays on the streets, which increases profitability. It is not enough to know that crackdowns are occurring; often this general information will lead to the hiding of pushcarts and product for an extended period of time provoking a loss of sales and customer contempt. Vendors must carefully balance how much they are willing to vend within the window of time they are given before health inspectors arrive. When information is accurate vendors can finish ongoing transactions while allowing enough time to hide the pushcart or, in less ideal instances, walk away from the pushcart.

For Jesús, the useful nature of warning systems was made apparent not in its use but in its absence:

The cops were following this man with a cart selling ice cream. I would see the man regularly; he would head up towards a school [to sell]...He'd always walk by, he'd greet me and I'd greet him, and I saw him walking up. He would come back around 5 in the afternoon, heading home. That day I saw him—I saw that he was running, pushing his cart, running as fast as he could! So I ask him, 'What happened? Why you running?' He said to me, 'I just forgot something at home, so I'm headed home.' But he'd already seen the police coming. He didn't warn me because he knew that if he warned me, I was going to hide. So then they'd catch him. And since they were close behind, what he did was just to run straight [past me]... so the police arrived and saw *me* there!

The man with the ice cream cart had no kinship or *paisano* link to Jesús and therefore no obligation to keep him safe. Instead of warning Jesús, he lied to him so that he could have time to escape. As Jesús explained, had the ice cream vendor been kith or kin, this interaction would have been very different. These warning systems allow vendors, who typically work alone on street corners, to feel the safety and protection of a group. Information about ongoing crackdowns serves in the short-term to finalize or maximize sales, and in the long-term to evade LAHD and LAPD officers in order to vend another day.

### ***Safety in Geography and Alliances***

The positioning of fruit vendors throughout Los Angeles County is anything but random. Vendors seek sidewalk spaces that offer access to customers, protection, a useful infrastructure, and potential allies. Geographical location is often a trade off, as safer locations are less profitable than high-risk locations. *Fruteros* must know how to carefully balance these risks and benefits when deciding where to vend.

The first criterion when scouting a new location is the presence and even abundance of Latinos. While hitching a ride from Domingo, a middle-aged cart owner always on the hunt for new opportunities, I was asked about the neighborhood in West Los Angeles where a university is located (Westwood Village). Were there vendors working in the area? Were there Latinos in the area? Although new to the area at the time, I had noticed plenty of Latinos—most often working in the service-oriented businesses of the neighborhood. A few weeks later Domingo dropped one of his workers near the southern part of campus and tested the Westwood Village location; the vendor was soon cited by police and told to move. Domingo explained to me that a “Latino area” to him was measured more by the number of Latino residents than by the actual number of Latinos in public spaces.

When discussing this issue with two other vendors, Carmen and Cristian, they explained that Latino neighborhoods provided a sense of security because it was a known population. Cristian further explained that, to his knowledge, Latinos had more “experience” buying from street vendors. Though fruit vending caters to a wide range of people and thrives in areas not considered to have high concentrations of Latino residents, some cart owners like Domingo use this information as a preliminary test to measure a neighborhood’s tolerance for their presence and to roughly calculate their potential for sales. This process is representative of immigrant entrepreneurship where businesses cater to a captive market of co-ethnics before catering to a broader clientele (Rath and Kloosterman 2000).

The first set of vendors that I met was well established in west Los Angeles County including the city of Santa Monica and the beachfront district of Venice. For these vendors, the farther west they ventured—into less Latino-dominated and more affluent neighborhoods—the less severe police officers were, the more scarce gang members became, and the less frequently health inspectors appeared. Some of these characteristics might seem unexpected, but one reason vendors in these areas are not as severely regulated is that there are fewer of them. Areas like the Fashion District and MacArthur Park closer to downtown Los Angeles have many more street vendors; as a result, crackdowns initiated by the Health Department have the capacity to be more successful if they focus on areas with many clusters of potential offenders. But while vending farther west carries less risk, it is also less profitable. West Los Angeles vendors see fewer pedestrians than their downtown counterparts. In these cases, a vendor must make a choice between lower risk and lower sales or higher risk and higher sales.

In an effort to seek out pedestrians in a city dominated by cars, vendors gravitate towards businesses that generate pedestrians. Banks, grocery stores, carwash lots, gas stations, and public

transportation nodes are popular locations. The most popular location is near or in front of a bank. Vendor transactions are in cash and ATMs provide would-be customers with a ready supply of it. Among the vendors I visited and interviewed, all were working or had worked in front of a bank.

Banks also often employ street-based service workers, like parking attendants, with whom fruit vendors can create an alliance. These attendants may not be able to help when police or health inspectors arrive, but they can help to hide a vendor, convince a bank manager that a vendor does not pose a threat to the business, act as mediators when disputes between fruit vendors and customers arise, and relay information to cart owners if and when a vendor is arrested. All the vendors who worked in front of banks with parking attendants befriended them as soon as they could. Often times this was done by giving away free fruit salads. In the months that I worked with Carmen we saw four different parking lot attendants cycle in and out of the location and she made a special attempt to befriend each of them. Beyond the potential for strategic friendship, parking lot attendants are often co-ethnics who speak Spanish and can help vendors pass the time on slow days.

José, who worked in the parking lot of a large chain grocery store, befriended the Latino store manager by offering free fruit. Conversations between the two often revealed very useful information for José. The parking lot where José worked additionally functioned as an informal mechanic's shop. When the mechanic's customers were dissatisfied with the service they received, they would sometimes complain to the grocery store manager. The manager, angry about their misplaced complaints, would often call the police. The police would do nothing on the grounds that this was private and not public property, and that fixing cars was not a crime. This information was transmitted to José by the manager:



I sometimes ask the manager of the grocery store “Hey and what if the cops come?” and he tells me not to worry about it and says, “He [the cop] has no reason to bother you cause when I call him they tell me they can’t do anything because it’s private property” and so we [fruit vendors] don’t have to leave. The manager calls the cops on [the mechanic] but the cops don’t do anything ‘cause “it’s private property.”

While the information given to José by the store manager was not entirely accurate—vendors are in violation of ordinances that *could* prompt police officers to issue a citation or arrest—it nevertheless showcases the alliance between the two men. The store manager felt comfortable enough to share his job-related frustrations with the vendor who in turn felt safer on the street corner as a result of this friendship.

The sites where vendors decide to set up shop and the alliances they create at these locations do not limit or prevent LAHD/LAPD crackdowns. However, they do much to set a fruit vendor’s mind at ease and may even facilitate evasion tactics down the line. These features of a street corner location can significantly reduce the level of stress a fruit vendor feels while on the job. And stress of the job was a recurring motif in all my conversations with vendors. Vendors who feel safer in their locations are likely to be more efficient workers and therefore more profitable and less likely to lean on their social networks for resources. It is for this reason that street corners with positive geographic and alliance-building qualities are guarded ferociously and not easily ceded to other vendors (within and outside their vending networks). Vendors often know what street corners are taken in a given neighborhood and will not violate this tenancy even when no fruit vendor is present.

### ***Turning Threats into Resources***

While LAPD officers frequently patrol the streets where vendors are located, policing and citing street vendors generally are a low priority. Officers are used in combined LAHD-

LAPD sweeps during major crackdowns but rarely do they conduct sweeps of their own.<sup>23</sup>

Instead police officers will ask a fruit vendor to move or issue a citation only after several complaints have been made by private citizens or business owners (cf. Muniz 2011). More often than not, police officers and fruit vendors see and interact with each other in civil and quotidian ways. Civil interactions are often facilitated by a shared ethnic background and language. Thus Spanish-speaking Latino cops will develop civil relationships with these Latino fruit vendors. *Fruteros* embrace these types of interactions in order to turn the threat that police officers present into a possible resource.

Fruit vendor-police officer interactions are quite common. While one might expect these to be more confrontation than interaction, the vast majority of vendors develop positive or neutral relationships with cops through sustained civil interaction. The reasons for this vary. Vendors, as a steady presence on street corners, can assist police officers in monitoring the streets in the role of a “public character” (Jacobs 1961). They thus become police officers’ “eyes upon the street” and help make the street corners where they work “safer, stabler, and more predictable” (Duneier 2000: 8). As fixtures in the urban landscape, vendors can also provide a respite to cops from the doldrums of police work. Fruit vendors sustain these interactions in an effort to gain useful information and to develop friendships that might help them down the road. In this way, fruit vendors curb – that is, bring to the street corner *and* bridle—the officers that might one day be charged with citing or arresting them. However, this vendor-officer relationship is a tenuous one.

It is important to acknowledge the very disparate power dynamic that exists between police officers and vendors. Police officers represent an imminent threat that can result in

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<sup>23</sup> Notable exceptions include official visits from the President of the United States and the sweeps that take place on those occasions are to secure the route of the presidential motorcade. These sweeps often displace vendors but do not result in citations or arrests.

citations, arrest, and, in the era of Secure Communities,<sup>24</sup> the possibility of deportation. Police officers represent a population with rights and privileges that extend above an average citizen's while fruit vendors represent a population whose presence in the country and whose work on the street corner are both illegal. Thus, interactions between these two groups must be assessed through the lens that this power differential affords. Regardless of the type of interaction, police officers always have the upper hand and this can be leveraged in different ways. Police officers have complete discretion and can decide whether to cite or arrest a vendor at any point because they are always in violation of anti-vending ordinances in the County (LACC) and City (LAMC) codes. However, officers are also charged with protecting these individuals who might represent ideal victims to various types of criminals. Fruit vendors are always cognizant of this power differential. And like the other survival strategies presented here, befriending a police officer diminishes but does not entirely remove that threat. While civil relations with police officers may dominate one day, a police officer's official duties might bring her to the street corner in an oppositional role the next. In what follows, I present three civil relationships that existed between vendors and police officers. The first two represent different types of civility from quotidian exchanges to bantering flirtations. I also present a third case in which a police threat turned resource became a threat again.

José represents an instance of “eyes upon the street” in which police officers used him, as a fixture on the street corner, to report on the neighborhood climate following a robbery in the area. For the police officers on the neighborhood beat José functioned as an informal, and at times hesitant, lookout.

**Field Notes:** It's a slow Tuesday afternoon and José doesn't have much fruit left in his cart so customers aren't stopping to buy fruit. After about 40 minutes without a customer

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<sup>24</sup> Secure Communities is a federal information-sharing partnership between ICE and the FBI (see introduction).

José calls the cart owner and asks to be picked up but is told he'll have to wait another hour or two due to traffic. José leans on his cart with his back to the street and chucks ice cubes from his cart into a box full of trash a couple of feet away. I sit on a milk crate nibbling on some left over coconut pieces when I see a police patrol car coming down the street. As the police approach us they decelerate and come to a rolling stop in front of us. I sit up straight and avert my eyes, which causes José to glance over his left shoulder. He sees the cops but does not react and his stance remains relaxed. The Latino cop on the passenger side closest to us leans his head partially out and asks in Spanish, “¿*todo calmado?*” [everything calm?] to which José responds by apathetically nodding yes and just as quickly as they showed up the cops are gone again.

José explained to me that those were neighborhood cops. José worked near a gas station and about a year prior there was a robbery at the convenience store. When the police came to file a report they asked José if he had seen anything—he had not. For several days after the incident, the cops maintained a stronger presence in the area and began to “drop in” on José to ask if he had seen the suspect or if he had noticed any unusual activity. Though José remained in the dark about the theft and the suspect’s capture—he never asked the police officers follow up questions and does not maintain a relationship with the rotating crew of gas attendants—he continued to interact with the police officers through brief encounters such as this one. After a year, regardless of whether the convenience store robbery was solved or not, the continued check-in by police officers signaled to José that he had become a source of potentially valuable information. Though José did not care for the cops, he knew that these brief encounters served a purpose and, given the power differential, he never did anything to dissuade the cops from “dropping in.”

Among the male vendors I interviewed with similar relationships to police officers, none reported having extended conversations or interactions. This seemed to be the result of both parties’ unwillingness to engage for long periods of time. Male vendors when remembering conversations and in observed interactions with police officers, tended to give short, non-open ended responses to questions put forth by police officers. Police officers on their part did not

leave their patrol car during the interaction and sometimes only slowed their vehicle to a creeping roll to take part in it.

José's regular interaction with these neighborhood cops was a benign one, which, in terms of relationships that can exist between civilians and cops (cf. Howell, Perry, and Vile 2004; Rosenbaum, Schuck, Costello, Hawkins, and Ring 2005; Seron, Pereira, and Kovath 2004; Weitzer and Tuch 2004), can be perceived as a positive one. The police officers' regular visits allowed them to view José not as a threat but as a resource. The police officers' familiarization with José's routine and José with theirs also enabled the police officers to better protect him if the need ever arose. In a similar way, José turned the threat of these police officers into a potential resource. His familiarity with them allowed him to approach them with any complaint or question that he might have. The police presence also helped to keep José's business safe and prevented "rent" collecting *cholos* [gang members] from visiting his street corner. In this way, José was able to take this mundane and routine interaction and advance his own interests.

On another extreme were the interactions that Carmen had with police officers on her street corner. As a young woman selling on the street, the interactions Carmen had with officers were more playful and flirtatious than José's. Carmen first met the two police officers when they approached her to buy fruit one early afternoon. They parked their patrol car on the northernmost lane heading west on Wilshire Boulevard—a major boulevard that runs through most of the city—and purchased two bags of fruit salad. Carmen gave them much larger portions than her regular customers and, with time, their visits became routine. Only one cop could speak Spanish but both would try to converse with Carmen while they waited for their fruit. Carmen's good-natured demeanor set the officers at ease and interactions went from perfunctory to playful after several encounters.

**Field notes:** In anticipation of another wave of customers, I busied myself peeling mangoes and cucumbers while Carmen sat down and rested. She was giving me the latest gossip while sitting in a fold out chair facing me (her back to the busy boulevard). Suddenly, I looked up from the cutting board and saw, through the Plexiglas top of the pushcart, a police car parked in front of us. I gestured with my eyes to Carmen (and expected the worst). Carmen leaned back and turned her entire upper body to look at what I was gesturing towards. The cops said nothing and then Carmen while smiling yelled, “GO AWAY! I don’t have time to shoot the shit right now, can’t you see I’m working?!” she said as she gestured at her sitting body. The Latino cop chuckled and said, “all right, we’ll see you later!”

These two police officers, a Latino and African American, often visited Carmen to chat and flirt. They teased her and asked her if she had a boyfriend or if she had friends with whom they could go on dates. Often, the Latino police officer would converse with Carmen in Spanish while the non-Spanish speaking African American cop would stand by and listen, interjecting occasionally with a question asking, “what did you say?” or “what did she say?” Carmen never took them seriously but did string them along telling them she had good-looking cousins who were young and single. Often she would show the police officers pictures of her attractive twenty-something cousins dressed in tight and revealing dresses.

The relationship Carmen established with the police officers was casual and the police officers often purchased fruit from her. Later, when Carmen confronted trouble or heard of another vendor in some type of trouble she would call these officers, whose phone numbers she had, and ask for assistance. When Manuel had a nasty interaction with a police officer at a new vending location, Carmen told these police officers. They in turn told Carmen that her friend, Manuel, should file a complaint with the police headquarters that corresponded to the neighborhood where the incident took place. (Though Carmen passed on this information to Manuel, he never went to file a complaint.) Carmen benefited from her relationship in at least two ways: she improved her sales by selling fruit regularly to these visiting cops and she diminished threat by using them as a resource for information and assistance. These cops would

not only come to chat with Carmen but would also look out for her safety. Unlike José's "eyes upon the street" relationship with cops, Carmen's interactions helped police stave off boredom by "shooting the shit" with them.

Of course, routine interactions and positive social relationships with police officers have limits. The case of Jesús shows how a friendly relationship with cops was trumped by pressing issues of public safety. Although a vendor's street corner actions are always meant to reduce risk and remove threat, they are not always interpreted the same way by different parties. This was the case with Jesús who sold outside of a Sears store and came into conflict with the manager of that store after his interactions with a drunken group of men were misinterpreted. Although Jesús and the manager of the Sears store had the same goal—to create a safe and civil public space that would attract potential customers and increase sales—they each had opposing visions as to how this space could be created:

[The second time I was confronted by a cop] was [due to] a group of drunken men from El Salvador and Guatemala. They drank a lot and would gather near my street corner... [While drunk] they would pick the mango pits from my trash box and eat them. [I didn't like this and] would give them fruit and tell them to go away. The manager of the Sears told me that he didn't want me having all those people there. He assumed they were gathering there because I was providing them with food. That is to say, the food I'd throw away... The manager told me to get the drunk men away from there. But I couldn't make them go away, that's where they lived [in an apartment complex next to the Sears]. I *would* give them fruit sometimes, and then they would move a little further away. But since there was a [surveillance] camera there, at the entrance, it captured everything, and that's where the manager would see. The police would make me move, again and again, they would chase those drunk guys away. The police officer, he was a nice guy.... it was actually two police officers [that would always show up] and both of them knew me. And they'd make me move. Sometimes he'd say to me, 'You know the deal. Just take down your umbrella until we leave.' I would take down my umbrella for a little bit, until they went away, then I'd put it back up again and continue selling. I wouldn't move my cart...I worked like that for about four months. And one day the police officer showed up and told me that he'd received a report that two guys had come to blows there. Drunk, they'd come to blows. And since there's a lot of gang activity around there because of the Mara [Salvatrucha], a *cholo* had shown up and beat them both up. But I didn't work that day; I didn't go sell there. But the police officer said that he'd been reprimanded, that he had to come and make me move for real this time.

Even though the Sears manager called the police to enforce his own vision of safety and civility, Jesús' own interactions and relationship with the neighborhood police officers staved off conflict for a few months. However, in the end the violence of drunken men and of *cholos* compelled the neighborhood police officers to banish Jesús and his street vendor peers from the corner. The Sears manager, in turn, never realized that Jesús offered fruit to the drunken men not to befriend them, but to get rid of them and to keep them from digging through his trash. The manager misinterpreted the fruit gifting because he viewed it through the surveillance camera and out of context. He saw Jesús in the same light as the drunken men. To the manager, Jesús was part of the problem and not the solution. And though Jesús had a good relationship with the police officers, the threat posed by fighting drunks and gang members was more important to quell than keeping Jesús vending in that location. Despite this, Jesús was able to rely on his friendly relationship with the cops to hold on to this profitable vending location for longer than would have otherwise been possible.

Although some fruit vendors invest time and effort nurturing their relationships with police officers, that relationship can quickly turn negative and/or end. Almost inevitably, police officers are ordered to enforce the law and act against a vendor's interest and when they do, by chasing vendors from their street corners for example, they also extinguish the opportunities for regular social and civil interactions. Vendors acknowledge that maintaining police officers as resources is an ephemeral endeavor. Some assessed the mercurial quality of vendor-officer relationships in a resigned way as Ricardo did when he said, "On a day-to-day basis [street vending] is annoying and boring. There are problems. Sometimes the police will give you a hard time, some days they won't. One week they will harass you and not the next. Sometimes they'll throw away your cart and sometimes they'll just give you a warning." Few *fruter*os held grudges



against officers who had turned into threats after a long-standing civil relationship; vendors recognized that police officers' occupational duties were often at odds with their interests. Vendors also knew that when the time came, police officers' attempt to issue citations, confiscate goods, or arrest them would be met with evasive tactics on their part.

### ***Conclusion***

Compared to their immigrant informal worker peers, fruit vendors are at a considerable disadvantage. Unlike them, fruit vendors engage in an informal occupation that is explicitly forbidden in Los Angeles by city and county laws. The Los Angeles Health and Police Departments continuously monitor the streets of this city and enforce these laws. Crackdowns that result in the confiscation of goods, citations, displacement, and even arrest can be financially devastating for fruit vendors. This enforcement undermines fruit vendors' best efforts to operate and generate profit. In response, vendors implement survival strategies to remedy problem situations arising from their precarious positioning. These survival strategies include: a reliance on kinship and *paisano* networks; street patrols and alerts; geographic positioning and alliance building; and turning threats into resources. The first strategy provides a safety net for vendors; distributing the hardship over many shoulders diminishes the economic vulnerability of a single vendor. The other three strategies serve to decrease vulnerability on the street and/or to increase income generation. In the end, survival strategies offer short-term remedies but do not resolve larger issues rooted in the regulatory structure of the Los Angeles local government.

The main and most reliable survival strategy is the financial dependence on kinship and *paisano* networks. When other survival strategies fail—that is, when crackdowns occur and financial hardship arises—vendors lean on the social networks of which they are a part to survive. Unfortunately, one vendor's hardship adversely impacts all of the members of the

network because it depletes the limited resources of the group. And because large-scale crackdowns typically target and apprehend many vendors at a time, it is likely that one social network will absorb the hardship of many fruit vendors at a time. This collective hardship and web of obligations makes it difficult for individual members of the group to save capital and pull forward. Fred Krissman notes that “networks are critical to those living close to the economic margin and/or lacking access to the services often provided by formal institutions” (2005: 5). Unfortunately for fruit vendors, networks may also contribute to the perpetuation of that economic marginality. Street vendors also deploy other street-level, risk-averse strategies meant to diminish everyday vulnerabilities in an effort to avoid leaning on social networks. In many instances, these strategies force vendors to make tradeoffs between income generation and risk.

Survival strategies allow vendors to operate in the gap between codified law and enforcement, but do not dislodge them from their informal liminality. Unfortunately for *fruteros*, the trap of informality, the limited benefits offered by survival strategies, and the continuous enforcement of anti-vending regulations contribute to limited upward mobility, economic stagnation, and poverty.

Accounts provided by fruit vendors continuously point to the ways in which the poverty of their condition—fear of arrest, begging on street corners, recurrent fines and confiscations, economic hardship, and increased vulnerability—arises from their liminal positioning. This type of liminality and subsequent poverty might be expected from an immigrant group whose demographic characteristics include undocumented status, limited education and capital, and little to no English language proficiency. Yet, fruit vendors’ immigrant peers in other informal occupations fare much better and are even upwardly mobile within the first generation. Fruit vendors are subjected to crackdowns that enforce what some scholars have called immigrant

poverty intolerant legislation (Light 2006). These crackdowns have accentuated and even perpetuated poverty among immigrant fruit vendors. The regulatory backlash encumbers *fruteros*' potential to thrive. Without the criminalization by the state, vendors would be able to accumulate profit instead of merely conserving for hardship. Profitability would lead to upward mobility and, in some instances, return migration. Instead, fruit vendors are trapped and marginalized in an occupation that diminishes the effort and hard work that they put forth.

Given these risks, why do vendors stay in this line of work? Several reasons exist. While the availability of fruit vending positions pull these individuals to Los Angeles, other undocumented workers vying for jobs saturate the labor market accessible to them outside of fruit vending (Light and Roach 1996). Some fruit vendors also believe that the freedom associated with fruit vending is preferable to wage labor in highly supervised settings; others believe that fruit vending, while inconsistent, pays better than wage labor. Emir Estrada and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo have also noted how new moral constructions are created among the Latino immigrant youth of their study to infuse dignity into the occupation of street vending (2010). Finally, the struggle associated with the occupation also helps to create community among fruit vendors. Narratives of struggle are often shared during social gatherings or during cell phone conversations throughout the day and allow the group to bond. During social gatherings, vendors take turns sharing stories of cunning or of particularly severe crackdowns. These narratives reify and enhance group membership. Familial obligations, offered and accepted, also root vendors to the occupation. Thus, many vendors opt to continue working as fruit vendors despite the increased difficulty of the job. And as Garni and Miller have noted: "Restrictive policies frequently fail to dissuade migrants from attempting to secure livelihoods in the U.S., and instead force them to modify their behaviors, potentially suffer physical and mental

strain, economic hardship and social isolation” (2008: 448). Fruit vendors may be able to earn enough income to subsist, but mounting debt sometimes undermines their best efforts. *Fruteros* engage in an occupation with limited viable opportunities for upward mobility and many risks of downward mobility or economic stagnation. In the end, this occupation creates a cycle of poverty for this population of disadvantaged immigrant workers and fails to fulfill the promise of economic improvement through hard work and ingenuity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INFORMAL AGREEMENTS: TRUST, CONTROL, AND BOUNDED OPPORTUNITY

Fruit vendors live and work in a parallel society structured by issues of informality. A notable characteristic of this informality is the absence of legally binding contracts. Despite this, fruit vendors regularly engage in various types of informal agreements to run their businesses and secure a livelihood. In these instances, the only buffer between economic exchange and financial calamity are these informal agreements based on trust. This chapter explains how *fruteros* craft informal agreements in which goods, services, and currency are exchanged and the role that trust networks, social control, and bounded opportunity play in making and keeping these agreements. I focus on two types of informal agreements, those dealing with: (1) securing loans and credit lines; and (2) crafting employment arrangements. I also analyze what happens when fruit vendors do not abide by these informal agreements. I use the Cuban notion of *resolviendo*<sup>25</sup> [resolving/getting by] to analyze how vendors confront and manage conflicts when informal agreements fall apart. *Resolviendo* has been defined as the ability to manage, resolve, and innovate in an attempt to survive, and perhaps even thrive, with limited resources. It implies engaging in acts of ingenuity and/or unscrupulous tactics. To live *resolviendo* entails a circumscribed existence and the desire to live beyond the boundaries set by structural obstacles (de Larrea 2001; Fernandez 2010). For fruit vendors in Los Angeles, their circumscribed existence is a consequence of both their informal work arrangements and undocumented status.

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<sup>25</sup> The term *resolviendo* came into popular use in Cuba during the “Special Period” of material deprivation and economic crisis provoked by the fall of the Soviet Union and a continuing US embargo. Fernandez (2010) has noted that in the Cuban Special Period, “basic consumption took on political significance and each act of *resolviendo* became a strategy of resistance” against a state unwilling or unable to provide for its people.

Thus, both informal agreements and *resolviendo* tactics emerge as a consequence of fruit vendors' positioning outside of the formal economy.

In many ways, street vendors are archetypical informal economy laborers. As a result, agreements regarding credit, loans, and wages take place between individuals, and not with formal institutions. These informal agreements among fruit vendors rely primarily on trust; trust emerges from and depends on dense social networks where peers often work, live, and socialize with one another. According to Tilly (2007), people rely on “interpersonal trust networks,” to carry out long-term, crucial enterprises. These trust networks “consist of ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others” (Tilly 2007: 7). Two points that Tilly makes regarding these trust networks are especially important: First, members of these trust networks “typically acquire long-term rights and obligations binding themselves to each other, which means that the networks operate simultaneously as sites of social insurance and social control” (2007: 6). Second, these trust networks create and depend on boundaries that separate members from outsiders; however, that segregation can confine members to a narrow range of opportunities for work, housing, sociability, and welfare. This chapter examines both social control and bounded membership as they relate to informal agreements and trust networks among fruit vendors.

Trust has been juxtaposed with control (Das and Teng 1998; Möllering 2005). As Möllering noted, a trust/control duality “entails that trust and control each assume the existence of the other, refer to each other and create each other, but remain irreducible to each other” (Möllering 2005: 283). The duality perspective presents the problem of how individuals come to reach positive expectations from others whose behavior can positively or negatively affect them.

In other words, the problem of trust lies in how the risk of malfeasance, mistakes, and failure of others is managed. This duality perspective of trust/control holds that individuals create positive expectations by “interpreting complex interactions between structural influences on actors and the possibility of either benevolent or malevolent action” but, because of uncertainty, positive expectations require suspension (Möllering 2005: 284). Social control is a built-in structural influence in trust networks that can decrease uncertainty.

Trust networks necessitate strong ties between members. As described in Chapter Two, the bounded nature of kinship and *paisano* networks ties the financial hardship of one to all. Similarly, within trust networks, the risk of the malfeasance, mistakes and failure of one is tied to all. In an effort to reduce this risk, membership in trust networks becomes exclusive and boundaries between the in-group and out-group are reinforced. Unfortunately, this bounded trust network also creates bounded opportunities. As Tilly wrote: “If those opportunities connect members with rich rewards, the network prospers. If not, it often suffers” (2007: 6).

In this chapter I will review two types of informal agreements. The first agreements deal with how fruit vendors secure savings, credit, and loans within the informal sector. I present the case of rotating credit associations, credit extension at the wholesale fruit market, and securing loans from private individuals. For each case I analyze how risk, uncertainty, and social control are managed and the limitations of bounded membership and opportunity. The second set of informal agreements deal with employment arrangements between cart owning bosses and fruit vending workers. I analyze how the absence of social control increases risk and leads to broken informal agreements that then impact the bounded trust network.

## **Savings, Credit, and Loans**

When vendors participate in rotating credit associations, receive credit extensions from the wholesale fruit market, and solicit loans from private individuals they rely on trust networks to ensure a somewhat smooth economic exchange and to help reduce uncertainty. The fruit vendor trust networks behind these informal agreements are based on strong ties and have built-in systems of social control. If a vendor falters in paying their weekly dues in the rotating credit association, fails to pay back the debt owed at the wholesale market, or defaults on a loan, they have violated the terms of their informal agreement and the trust network. The breaking of trust in these informal agreements can have cascading effects and negatively impact other aspects of work and social life, which are bound by the same network. In these first examples, the payments are made and rules abided by because the risks and penalties for violating the trust are too high.

### ***Dos Mundos Migrant Tandas***

*Tandas*, also called *condinas*, are “rotating credit associations” (Geertz 1962) which are “formed upon a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund which is given, in whole or in part, to each contributor in rotation” (Ardener 1964: 201). As Geertz noted, the essential component lies in revolving access to a continuously reconstituted capital fund (1962). The use of *tandas* by individuals to save and distribute money among a group of people is a widespread practice in Mexico; Oscar Lewis alluded to them in his seminal works without defining what they were (1959; 1961). The purpose of these *tandas* has been debated. Geertz considered them intermediate, or “middle rung,” institutions of economic development that educated the peasants, urban proletariat, and peasant migrants turned city-dwellers who took part in them. He believed their participation in rotating credit associations would prepare them for participation in urban commercial structures and institutions and “act as a bridge between



peasant and trader attitudes toward money and its uses” (Geertz 1962: 242). Raymond Firth (1964) doubted that such simple institutions could have such a widespread impact and instead argued that rotating credit associations had the function of a credit union, insurance scheme, and saving club. Others noted that rotating credit associations do not serve to educate participants but instead are used to save money for both expected and unexpected needs (Anderson 1966; Kurtz 1973). Thus, they represent an adaptation to “small-scale consumer needs among people with limited resources in a full cash economy” (Kurtz and Showman 1978: 66). Today, enough studies (Anderson 1966; Ardener 1964; Biggart 2001; Geertz 1962; Kurtz 1973; Kurtz and Showman 1978; Wu 1974) have been conducted to show that rotating credit associations are flexible and can respond to different types of socio-economic environments and have different functions within them.

Among the fruit vendors I studied, a *tanda* formed around a core group of participants hailing from the small town of Dos Mundos<sup>26</sup> in the Mexican state of Puebla. The group initially consisted of Dos Mundos migrants who were fruit vendors and then expanded to include other fruit vendors from other towns in the state of Puebla. Carmen, who is from Mexico City, entered the *tanda* because of her long-term relationship with Dos Mundos-born Cristian. When Cristian returned to Mexico, Carmen remained in the *tanda* and eventually brought in a few of her associates. The number of participants in this *tanda* has varied in the four years that I followed vendors. It peaked with 31 members and dwindled, in winter months when funds are low among all, to six. The *tanda* lasts the same number of weeks as there are numbers. Each participant gets a number but can “buy” more numbers. They contribute \$100 every week for every number they have. In some instances, two people have shared a number contributing \$50 each week and then splitting the payout.

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<sup>26</sup> The name of the community in Mexico has been changed to protect the confidentiality of respondents.

The *tanda* that ended in June of 2012 had 19 participants with 21 numbers, while the one that began the following month had 24 participants with 29 numbers issued. The July 2012 *tanda* included six people who were not fruit vendors, all of them joined through Carmen. They included: two of Carmen's female cousins who worked in an ice cream shop, two of their co-workers from that ice cream shop, a male cousin who worked for the City of Los Angeles, and an uncle who worked in construction in Texas and wired the money to Carmen every week. The other 18 participants were fruit vendors from the state of Puebla. Funds are collected every Monday morning and distributed by Tuesday evening. Participants are able to pick the order, or number, in which they would like to receive the total payout. Typically, participants align their payout number with the date in which bills (e.g. home or commissary rent, car payment) or expenses (new pushcart, citation) are due. Most participants used the payout for anticipated expenses.

Rotating credit associations depend on trust between all the participants involved. Carmen has been participating in the Dos Mundos *tanda* for three years—each year sees multiple rotations—and has never had a participant of the *tanda* leave after receiving the payout. In those years she has participated in the *tanda* with largely the same group of people. This particular *tanda* relies on intersecting levels of trust. New members are taken only after being referred by an existing member. The existing member takes on the responsibility for the new member should they decide to leave the *tanda* after a payout. Carmen and Lucio are the two veterans of this *tanda* operation and each collects the money from their associates. They are responsible for collecting all of the money and putting up the money in case one of those associates fails to provide it. While the responsibility rests equally on all the participants' shoulders, there are always a few participants that act as the pillars of the group. As pillars they are responsible both

for selecting trustworthy individuals and for collecting all dues in a timely manner. Another level of trust comes from the ordering of the numbers. Newcomers are given the last numbers in the *tanda* to ensure that they pay each week until the very end.

The majority of the participants, and all of the fruit vendors, in this *tanda* are undocumented. They either do not want to, do not know how to, or cannot access banking institutions.<sup>27</sup> Most vendors stated that they participated in *tandas* for reasons that ranged from, “*me saca de mis apuros*” [it gets me out of jams] to “*me ayuda ahorrar*” [it can help me save up]. The use of a *tanda*, in this instance, is a method of forced savings that decreases the liquidity of the participant’s money and forces them to be patient for a return. As Carmen explained, “if you have it [money] you get it from your *cajoncito* [little drawer] and spend it, this way you get some responsibility instead.” While all those in the *tanda* joined to benefit from the advantages of a large sum of money, the *tanda* can also become a burden. In what follows, I show how *tandas* are both a resource and a liability for fruit vendors.

While the influx of money from a *tanda* payout can be a resource in and of itself, knowledge of a pending *tanda* payout can also be a resource. This was the case with Yolanda and Manuel. Yolanda is the owner of one of the wholesale fruit markets that caters to fruit vendors. She is from a town adjacent to Dos Mundos in Puebla. Because of her familiarity with many vendors and her *paisano* connection, Yolanda is aware of the Dos Mundos *tanda* though she does not participate in it. Shortly after Manuel starting working on his own using his own pushcart (*por su propia cuenta*) he came into hard times. During this period, Manuel asked Yolanda for an extension of credit for the first time. He asked Yolanda if he could buy fruit from

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<sup>27</sup> Contrary to popular belief, US citizenship is not required to open a bank account. Carmen, after working for years outside of a bank and establishing friendships with bank employees, opened a checking account at a bank employee’s urging. Lack of consistent access to her account information and overdraft fees eventually prompted her to close it.

her market on credit, explaining that what he sold by that evening would help him pay what he owed her in the morning. Yolanda's decision to extend credit hinged not only on *paisanaje* but on a bit of information she received about Manuel's participation in the *tanda*. Manuel told Yolanda that just two weeks from that day he was set to receive his *tanda* payout. Yolanda allowed Manuel to buy on credit using the *tanda* payout as collateral. Yolanda's decision to extend credit to Manuel based on this information mimics the way in which wealth can be generated within the stock market when prices rise and fall based on speculation, rumor, and assumption. Yolanda acted on the assumption that Manuel's payout would be used to pay off his growing debt; however, Manuel never provided proof to Yolanda that he was indeed participating in the Dos Mundos *tanda* (easily verifiable by her though) and he never offered any official contract providing the payout as collateral. Thus, participation in the *tanda* does not only benefit the participant, but other people who come to anticipate the payout too. In this case, Yolanda was an indirect beneficiary of the *tanda*.

Many vendors came to use the *tanda* payout to cover major expenses such as a down payment (or entire payment) on vehicles or pushcarts. Carmen, Manuel, Solomon, and Mateo used the *tanda* to place down payments on their vehicles. In fact, after several vendors in the Dos Mundos *tanda* used the payout for a down payment on a pick-up truck, other vendors opted to join the rotating credit association. This is how the group slowly began to grow in number. Among some members, participation in the rotation would end after the large purchase was made and they would not sign up for a following rotation. However, because major expenses and purchases—including buying a pushcart after a confiscation—were a recurring feature of the vending job, they inevitably would participate in the *tanda* at a later time.

The *tanda* can turn into a liability when there are too many numbers taken by the group. When a person has a payout at the beginning of a large rotation, the weeks that follow—in which they are continuously making payments but no longer expecting any return—can feel endless. As Ardener noted, while the *tanda* may appear to be an equitable mechanism for saving, the advantages are not equal for all participants:

The first member to receive the fund becomes a debtor to all the other members and remains one until the last contribution has been made; the last member to receive it becomes a creditor to all other members throughout; while the other...members move in turn from being creditors to debtors (1964: 201).

If a multiple-week *tanda* falls in the winter months, it can also be difficult to continuously make the weekly payment. The winter months for vendors are the least profitable because the price of fruit at the wholesale market increases and because rain keeps many vendors from working on their street corners. Generally, *tandas* in winter months consist of few participants or are stopped altogether.

The *tanda* is also a liability when unexpected calamity befalls a participant. *Fruteros'* informal work and undocumented status can lead to such a calamity. Most participants use the payout for *expected* expenses, but they do not anticipate unexpected expenses like vehicles breaking down, pushcarts being confiscated, or the issuing of citations by the health and police department. In cases where they do receive an unexpected expense like a bill or citation, their participation in the weekly *tanda* inhibits their ability to pay this expense in a timely matter, especially if the unexpected expense occurs after their payout. Fruit vendors may also be arrested for vending or a random traffic stop might reveal the lack of a driver's license and lead to an arrest. In the era of Secure Communities, these arrests may turn into ICE holds and, possibly, deportation. When this happens, the absence of a participant in the *tanda* turns into a liability for the pillar in the *tanda* group. If this pillar cannot afford to pay the unexpected additional number,

then the group takes the loss. This non-payment can contribute to the disbanding of the *tanda*. In *tandas* the misfortunes of participants are linked, if one member is arrested or suffers some type of financial calamity, then the entire group suffers. On the other hand, a participant's economic windfall will not positively affect the other members of the *tanda*.

When participants in *tandas* leave prematurely after receiving their payout but before completing the group rotation, it can signal the end of the group. The success of a *tanda* hinges on all of the members remaining in the rotation until everyone has received a payout. When one participant leaves, mistrust can infect the rest of the participants who may, in turn, decide to leave themselves. There are consequences that reverberate when trust in a *tanda* is broken; if an individual leaves this work-based *tanda*, mistrust can follow them into other aspects of their lives. As Ardener noted, "the member who defaults in one association may suffer such an extent that he may not be accepted as a member of any other (1964: 216).

Like other things in the informal economy, *tandas* are both a resource and liability. Rotating credit associations do not result in any accumulation of wealth. While *tandas* may function as a method of forced savings, unlike formal savings accounts, this informal fund does not accumulate interest over time. *Tandas* require strong ties between participants and they are very exclusive associations. For rotating credit associations to function properly, a great deal of trust is required. When *tandas* run smoothly that trust is rarely acknowledged; however, when they fail, it can affect relations between participants for a long time afterward and affect other deals down the road. Informal agreements based on trust leaves these migrants without legal recourse when something goes wrong. *Tandas* tie all of their misfortunes together and—given their high-risk work, their precarious financial status, and their undocumented presence in the country—misfortune is a recurring motif in their lives. While *tandas* can provide some financial

relief after a payout, they are limited in how much can be successfully raised and what they can do to improve a participant's life.

### ***Wholesale Market Credit Extension***

As mentioned above, when Manuel first asked for credit at the wholesale fruit market he used his *tanda* number as collateral. At the time, he had only been buying fruit from Yolanda for six months. While he did use part of his *tanda* money to pay back what he owed, hard times caused him to continue buying fruit on credit. Yolanda had come to trust Manuel because he had a history of repayment and as Russell Hardin wrote, "experience molds the psychology of trust" (1996: 27). However, within two months Manuel owed Yolanda \$3,800.00 and she ended his line of credit until he began repaying her. They worked out a payment plan so that Manuel could begin slowly paying back what he owed. During this same period, police and health department inspectors were routinely harassing Manuel. His pushcart was confiscated on several occasions and each time he had to invest in a new one. After each confrontation with city officials, his fruit was thrown out. Manuel was not making enough money to meet his daily expenses, much less to pay off his debt at the wholesale fruit market. Without telling Yolanda, Manuel decided to leave Los Angeles in order to work in the fields of Fresno.

When Manuel first arrived in the US in 2005, he went directly to Fresno to work with a couple of Dos Mundos neighbors. Though he was making steady money, life was dull and picking crops in the fields was labor intensive. He spent six months in Fresno before moving, with his uncle, to Los Angeles to work as a fruit vendor with another Dos Mundos *paisano*. He worked with three different Dos Mundos migrants until deciding to buy a pick-up truck, pushcart, and work on his own. In 2008 he bought a pick-up truck that cost him \$5,500.00 and a pushcart that cost him \$800.00. Within six months he had to begin buying fruit on credit from

Yolanda and later accumulated the large debt. By 2009, Manuel found himself driving north for the beginning of the grape picking season. After one month, Carmen and I visited Manuel in Fresno. He had shed several pounds and thought life was dull but he was making good money. When Manuel returned to Los Angeles after spending two months in Fresno, he went directly to Yolanda to pay off a large portion of his debt.

When I interviewed Yolanda, it had been several months since Manuel had returned to Los Angeles. She spoke of being worried when she heard Manuel had gone to Fresno. She hoped that he had not skipped out on his debt, but trusted that he would return. As she stated, “the truth is, we [she and the family members that help her run the business] were very scared he might not come back, we just held our breath and waited.” Yolanda was told by Manuel’s acquaintances that he had left but he had not told people that he left in order to make money to pay off his debt at the market. In fact, Manuel kept the large debt he owed to Yolanda a secret because he was ashamed of it. Yolanda’s hope was that Manuel would return to pay back the debt and not forsake his life in Los Angeles. Yolanda routinely extended credit to fruit vendors that she was well acquainted with and considered the credit extension a good business strategy. She did not want to lose clients to competitors because, as she noted, “in them is my profit” and losing clients was worse than being owed money by them. Yolanda explained that she allowed vendors to repay her in installments because:

If I ask for the money all at once, they’ll go buy elsewhere. I also know the details of people’s lives that cause them to get behind on payments. [For example,] I knew Manuel was having issues with his roommates and was moving to a different house and had to make a large deposit so I extended credit to him for that time period.

There were several wholesale fruit markets in the area, but by offering an extension of credit, Yolanda believed that she could build a base of loyal customers. Manuel explained that Yolanda was able to extend credit to several vendors at a time because she had a favorable profit margin.



When Nancy, a cart owner who always had at least ten pushcarts, bought fruit on credit from Yolanda she was granted a higher credit limit. At one point Nancy came to owe Yolanda over \$25,000.00 at the wholesale market. Nancy, unlike Manuel, ran a larger operation. Yolanda explained that Nancy would have daily credit extended that put her in debt at the \$1,000.00 to \$1,500.00 mark. Within a few weeks Nancy could accumulate a lot of debt with Yolanda. However, Yolanda knew that Nancy kept strict tabs on all of her fruit vendor employees. Nancy routinely counted the number of peeled fruits in a vendor's pushcart in the morning and assessed how many sales could be made from that fruit. At the end of the day she would compare her meticulous calculations with the cash reported by her vendors. Yolanda knew how well Nancy ran her informal business and for this reason was willing to grant her a larger credit line. Nancy also had more years of experience working as a cart owner than Manuel and had an established reputation among other vendors and with Yolanda.

Yolanda was not without recourse if vendors ever skipped out on their debt. As a wholesale market owner she was involved in a separate trust network that included other wholesale market owners. She maintained communication with other wholesale market owners in the area and made sure to communicate with them about which individuals owed money and had stopped making payments. This communication allowed wholesale market owners to contact each other if a vendor who owed money appeared at another market to buy fruit. In those cases, Yolanda was sure to rush over to the location in order to confront the debtor. Yolanda also kept an eye out in her stalls for vendors who owed other market owners money.

The extension of credit at the wholesale fruit market is a useful safety net for vendors in financial straits. It is a resource in that it allows vendors to continue working during the day even when they cannot afford to purchase fruit in the mornings. However, the debt that they begin to

owe Yolanda can turn into a liability when paired with bad sales, citations, confiscation, and arrest. As Manuel's case shows, sometimes the only option is to leave the city in order to make money elsewhere. However, despite the harsh circumstances in the fruit vending business, Manuel returned to the occupation, city, and people he knew. Had Manuel broken Yolanda's trust and not repaid his debt, he might not have been able to return to the fruit vending business at all.

### ***High Interest Loans from Private Individuals***

In January of 2011, Manuel began having problems with the pick-up truck he used to get himself, Carmen, and Olivia to work. At the time, Manuel commented that 2010 had not ended well for him and that 2011 was not looking any different. Manuel had the contact information for a mechanic he met while vending and called him. This mechanic charged Manuel \$1,200.00 to fix the truck and took a week to do so. In that time, Manuel and Carmen were receiving daily rides to their street corners from Mateo, who charged them \$200.00 at the end of the week for the rides. When Manuel and Carmen picked up the truck at the end of the week, Manuel was able to pay only \$300.00 and asked to pay the rest at a later time. The two used their *tanda* payouts to finish paying off the mechanic. However, a few weeks later the truck broke down again. When they returned to the mechanic, he said that the truck had no remedy but offered to buy the truck from them for \$400.00. Manuel sold his truck and a few days later after mentioned to other vendors that he felt scammed by the mechanic. Manuel and Carmen were left with no funds, no *tanda* payout, and were in need of a new truck in order to work. Carmen heard of a vendor who provided loans to other vendors and went in search of a personal referral to reach him.

The man Carmen met offered cash loans to people he knew personally and to those that were referred to him from his known, close associates. Carmen's referrer was a close friend of

the moneylender. Carmen did not know much about the moneylender. She only knew the he was divorced, from Puebla, and lived in a small rental apartment that had very few belongings. Carmen borrowed \$3,000.00 from the man with a 10 percent vig (interest rate) to be paid on a monthly basis throughout the term of the loan. Carmen negotiated for a three-month pay back period and on the first of every month drove to the man's small apartment to make the \$300.00 vig payments. On the third month, Carmen paid the man back in full and asked how the man managed to have enough cash to lend to other vendors. The man said he had relied on *tandas* to get a large sum of cash that he would then use to lend to others. He explained to Carmen how she could get into the business of lending money herself by signing up for five numbers in the *tanda* (paying \$500.00 every month) and to schedule an early payoff date. If the payout was \$10,000.00 she could save \$5,000.00 to continue making the weekly rotation payments while lending the other \$5,000.00 and collecting interest on that sum. The man was less forthcoming about what to do if someone failed to pay back the loan.

For Carmen and Manuel, the only option when placed in a difficult position with looming expenses was to revert to a somewhat high interest loan from a private individual. Though Carmen did not falter in her repayment plan, there were certainly mechanisms of enforcement that the man used in order to extract a repayment. Within the informal economy though, private individual loans like these are the only reliable and quickly accessible options. However, in order to gain access to private moneylenders, a vendor must have a widespread, strong tie social network. Manuel was unable to get a private loan because his network did not extend to this moneylender; it was only Carmen who had access to the private loan.

While informal loans from private individuals are a great resource during times of financial calamity, they are also limited and very exclusive. The reliance on trust networks to

reduce risk makes access to these types of loans very difficult. Within this informal system, the only selection criterion is trust built upon strong ties. In the formal economy, good credit and collateral might, arguably, make loans accessible to a larger number of individuals. However, these criteria do not carry over as notable markers in the informal sector. If an individual is not trusted, their record of repayment and cache of collateral will not suffice to receive a loan from a private individual.

The above examples of vendors' reliance on *tandas*, credit from the wholesale market, and loans from private individuals have resulted in some form of economic exchange based on trust networks. In these instances, trust was not violated; contributions and repayments were made, albeit at times very slowly. The social control that was part of the trust network ensured that economic exchange would continue unabated. While these informal agreements are not as stable as those found within the formal economy, they are nonetheless successful in accomplishing the small and measured goals of the group. In each instance, however, there were bounded opportunities. Those participants in the *tanda* were limited in the funds that they could collect and use. The *tanda* fund could never accumulate interest. Credit extension at the wholesale market also had limits, but an increasing reliance on it only created more debt for the fruit vendor. Loans from private individuals were the hardest to obtain, and the amount of money that could be borrowed was limited. In addition, longer repayment agreements entailed more payments of interest.

### **Informal Employment Arrangements**

Other informal agreements that vendors habitually enter into deal with employment. When a vendor has more than one pushcart and hires a person to work it, a verbal agreement is struck. Unlike employment arrangements in the formal economy, no contracts are signed listing

predetermined expectations, set wages, and payment dates. However, there are some general patterns in these informal employment agreements. In most instances, the pushcart owner will transport the worker and pushcart from the preparation site to the street corner. The owner is responsible for transporting fruit from the wholesale market to the preparation site and the worker is responsible for preparing his or her own pushcart. A typical daily wage of \$50.00 is paid to the worker. If a pushcart is confiscated or fruit discarded by the health department, the worker is not liable. A pushcart owner guarantees the worker steady employment, so long as the resources (i.e. pushcart and pick-up truck) are available. This employment agreement relies on trust. But, what happens when that trust breaks down? In the next section, I show how informal agreements regarding employment arrangements are broken and the *resolviendo* strategies that emerge as a result.

### ***Living with the Boss***

It is not uncommon for workers to live with the individuals who employ them. Typically, cart owners are fruit vendors themselves and the relationship can be somewhat egalitarian. Some cart owners will only have two carts—one that they work themselves and the other that they hire a worker to use. Dos Mundos has two sets of brothers that have become dominant players in the fruit vending business. Gabriel and Benjamin each own between five and eight carts, though numbers vary due to rates of confiscation. Neither of them works as a fruit vendor, instead they transport workers to their street corners and pick them up. These two are somewhat successful, they own brand new Ford F150 pick up trucks and the houses they are building in Dos Mundos are two-story, modern houses with columns. However, several fruit vendors have accused Gabriel and Benjamin of exploiting their workers. Manuel worked with Gabriel when he first arrived in Los Angeles from Fresno but left a few months later because Gabriel was not paying

his workers. At the time, Gabriel and Benjamin were purchasing plots of land in Dos Mundos and some believed that they were using the money that was meant for the workers to make this purchase. Jesús also had a negative experience working for Gabriel (see next chapter). The second set of brothers, Manolo and Andres, each own between two and five pushcarts. Both brothers will occasionally work as vendors, but they prefer to give rides to their workers and patrol the streets for health department inspectors. In May of 2012, Andres began charging vendors for his patrolling services. Andres would follow the LAHD caravans as they made their way through the city and warn those vendors who paid him a fee via phone if the LAHD was approaching their vending corner. Manolo and Andres' workers also complained about them as bosses and non-payment was the chief complaint.

In 2008, Manolo and Andres moved into a large house in East Los Angeles together, each with his wife and children. Their rent at this house was \$2,000.00 a month. A few months later, Andres was arrested and deported to Mexico (though he eventually returned). In an effort to make ends meet, Manolo asked one of his workers, Arturo, to move into a spare bedroom in the house. Manolo was stretched financially, making the \$2,000.00 monthly rent while paying \$500.00 a month on his pick up truck. Arturo discussed this housing offer with other fruit vendors who worked or had worked with Manolo and the overwhelming response was negative. Carmen was perhaps the most vocal in her opposition to Arturo's move, "they [Manolo and Andres] go too far [*se pasan*], they want to have a big house and live like kings and now that attitude has fucked them over." By November of 2009, Arturo and his girlfriend were living with Manolo. Arturo and his girlfriend paid Manolo \$800.00 a month in rent, slightly more than they were paying previously. The move displaced Arturo but he considered Manolo such a good

friend—they called each other *paisanos* despite Arturo being from Guatemala—that he moved in despite the warnings.

Within a few weeks, Arturo realized that Manolo owed thousands of dollars at the wholesale market to Yolanda. Arturo and the woman he was living with had a falling out and stopped seeing each other romantically while continuing to share the same bedroom due to financial need. Manolo's financial insecurity turned him into a bad boss and he stopped paying Arturo his daily wage consistently. Manolo should have been earning \$50.00 a day for five to six days of work per week. Soon, Manolo came to owe Arturo over \$1,000.00 in pay. Manolo owed Arturo's girlfriend, who also worked for Manolo as a vendor, \$2,000.00. In response, Arturo and his girlfriend's *resolviendo* tactic was to stop paying rent without feeling guilt or shame. This upset Manolo but he could not do anything about it since he was at fault.

While Arturo's decision to move in with Manolo was discouraged by other vendors, it did give him some leverage over his boss. Manolo lost some control over his worker when he asked Arturo to move in and came to rely on Arturo for financial assistance. There was no larger mechanism of social control because all the other vendors knew that Manolo was at fault. It was Manolo who broke the employment agreement and therefore received no support from other vendors. If Manolo failed to pay Arturo when Arturo lived elsewhere, Arturo would have been evicted. Arturo's *resolviendo* tactic was to use non-payment against Manolo. Arturo eventually began working for another vendor and made his daily wage while continuing to live both rent-free and guilt-free. Based on their own work histories and experience, the other vendors counseling Arturo predicted that Manolo would eventually exploit him. However, they could not have predicted how Arturo gained an advantage by moving in closer to the person doing the exploiting.

### ***Incarceration of the Cart Owner***

Despite his constant bad luck and financial troubles, Manuel had a period of financial stability in late 2011. During this time period, he owned his own pushcart and two others as well. He decided to hire two women to work the carts, paying them a \$50.00 daily wage. He was a novice cart owner and did much of the cart preparation for his workers. One of his workers did not show up in the mornings to prepare the cart, instead Manuel prepared the cart and dropped it off a block away from her house near MacArthur Park for her to work. Despite having two workers, Manuel was having a difficult time paying them and his personal expenses. Then, on a Friday in early September of 2011, while driving to a barber a few blocks from his South Central home, Manuel was pulled over by the LAPD. Manuel was arrested for driving without a license. The moment Manuel was arrested he became a failure within his workers' trust network and could no longer be a resource to them. His workers had no option but to begin *resolviendo*.

No one noticed Manuel's absence until Saturday morning when his workers could not contact him. Solomon—his roommate, hometown associate, and a fellow fruit vendor—notified Carmen of Manuel's absence on Saturday afternoon. Carmen called me and I found Manuel on the LA sheriff inmate information website. I told her he had been arrested at 6:45PM on Friday for a traffic violation and his bail was \$2,500.00 Carmen went about trying to collect the amount to pay his bond. When she approached Solomon, he said he would not give any money because \$2,500.00 was too much. He also said Manuel would be released eventually and seemed apathetic about the whole situation. Carmen collected \$800.00 from other sources.

When Carmen and I arrived at the bail bonds agency across from the precinct jail, we were told Manuel no longer showed a bail amount because his file showed an ICE hold. He had been identified as an undocumented immigrant through the S-Comm Program. I was instructed



to visit Manuel in jail on Carmen's behalf. While I waited, Carmen went to talk to Solomon to explain the situation. When she returned she was crying and said that Solomon had prohibited her and Manuel's workers from preparing the pushcarts in their yard now that Manuel was in jail and not around. Carmen explained to Solomon that Manuel might be deported and Solomon responded by saying that it was fitting since he had not managed to make anything of himself while he was free. (Manuel was constantly in debt at the wholesale market and had a string of financial setbacks including several citations for vending, a DUI arrest that cost several thousand dollars, and police confiscations of his product.)

On Monday, after news spread about Manuel being on an ICE hold, people rushed to acquire Manuel's possessions. One of Manuel's workers said Manuel had not paid her, and she took one of his pushcarts to her home. The other worker, after getting into a fight with Solomon about working in his home, took another pushcart home so that she could continue working on her own using her own backyard as a preparation site. After I spoke to Manuel and retrieved his truck and home keys, Carmen took his pick-up truck to her home so she could continue working. Solomon found out that Carmen had Manuel's truck and told her she should give it to him or Don Martel (other roommate living with them) because Manuel owed them rent money. When Carmen went to Manuel's house on Monday to pick up her pushcart (while Solomon was away and working), she went into Manuel's locked room (using the room key I had picked up from Manuel in jail) and took \$100.00 that she saw laying on his desk and told me it was for any expenses that Manuel might have.

Manuel's deportation seemed imminent and everyone who felt Manuel owed them (as loan providers, co-workers, roommates, or employees) began taking his belongings with little regard for his well-being. Carmen was the most helpful but she did take his truck to continue

working – telling me later that she was going to work one day for herself and one day for Manuel until he was released or called from Mexico. Carmen seemed more concerned about Manuel’s release when it seemed that her own business was being threatened. Who would drive her to work? Where would she prepare her cart in the mornings? Where would she store it? Once it became apparent that Solomon didn’t want her around and Manuel might not get out of jail, she went to the commissary to pay for a storage space. Later, once she got his truck, she started working her corner again. Meanwhile, she told me to visit Manuel and talk to bail bonds people to see if he could be released, but seemed more concerned with working her corner than with Manuel’s status. When I called her to update her she would not pick up the phone and when we did speak, she seemed uninterested in the details and told me to take care of everything. Carmen lent me her car so that I could visit Manuel. At the time of his incarceration, Manuel was participating in the Dos Mundos *tanda*. He was one of the first to receive the \$3,100.00 payout, and Carmen began paying the \$100.00 weekly rotation for Manuel. As a result, Carmen felt justified in keeping Manuel’s truck.

When Manuel was arrested and later when his deportation seemed imminent, the people in his network were aware of how his misfortune would affect them. Carmen prepared her cart in Manuel’s yard and received rides from him so Manuel’s absence meant she had trouble working. As his roommates, Solomon and Don Martel would have to cover his portion of the rent. In addition, Manuel’s two employees had to continue working to maintain their own livelihood. The hardship that befell Manuel created a ripple effect of economic and personal crises for others around him. Their own financial difficulties prevented those that relied on Manuel from being helpful to him when he was incarcerated. They began to *resolver* for themselves even if this meant appearing apathetic or uncaring about Manuel’s situation. To secure their own livelihoods,

they began commandeering the few assets Manuel had and breaking ties that had previously worked but had been strained.

After a few weeks, Manuel was released from jail. He had no serious violations on his record and was not deported. Immigration and Customs Enforcement equipped him with an ankle monitor and imposed a strict curfew on him. He had to report every Friday morning to an immigration officer in downtown Los Angeles. Manuel lost both of his pushcarts. One was confiscated by the LAHD while one of his workers was using it, and he gave the other to his worker in lieu of wages. Manuel moved out of the house he shared with Solomon and Don Martel because he felt there was no trust left between them. He moved into a spare room in his worker's apartment (the room was a converted closet just large enough to fit his twin size bed).. While he was in jail, Manuel lost the few resources he had accumulated and he had to start building his business again, from scratch.

### ***Conclusion***

The two types of informal agreements discussed in this chapter, dealing with securing loans and credit lines and crafting employment arrangements, showcase a broad set of economic activities that fruit vendors take part in regularly. In the absence of legally binding contracts, vendors come to rely on social control and trust networks to maintain the flow of economic exchange. Some of these informal agreements become a liability when they fail to alleviate financial burdens and instead add to them. Fruit vendors enter into *tandas*, receive credit at the wholesale market, and acquire loans from individuals in times of crisis or financial need. However, these agreements are short-term remedies for long-term financial insecurities. When *fruteros* abide by their informal agreements, trust networks are reinforced. However, trust networks have bounded membership that can create bounded opportunity. The informal

agreements dealing with employment arrangements showcase what happens when social control is non-existent, agreements are broken, and trust fails. In these instances, those individuals who have felt wronged by another's malfeasance, mistakes, or failures take on *resolviendo* tactics. These tactics might seem unscrupulous but they are meant to safeguard those individuals from further financial calamity.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MIGRANTS OF DOS MUNDOS: IMMIGRANT OUTCOMES AND SENDING COMMUNITY

In this chapter, I focus on the *frutereros* from the sending community of Dos Mundos. Within this group there is little variation in migrant outcomes; put simply, they have not fared well in the U.S. I suggest they have not fared well because: 1) the hometown they come from and its cross-border influence, and 2) the cross-border competing interests that vie for migrants' social and economic attention. The effect of these two factors is compounded by the context of reception. I argue that for these migrants, the description of the U.S. as the "land of opportunity" is a misnomer given a confluence of variables including personal demographic characteristics, an economic recession in the host country, persistent waves of undocumented migration leading to a highly competitive (formal and informal) job market, and growing anti-immigrant sentiment. Given this context, the influence of the sending community and the cross-border connections to it negatively impacted these migrants. Thus, these migrants followed a structured legacy of economic disadvantage across the international border that could not be escaped.

The vast majority of migrants from Dos Mundos are men with grade school educations, limited occupational experience, with no English language proficiency, and from low-income households. Given their almost uniform demographic characteristics and their entry into one informal economy occupation, it is not surprising that their outcomes are analogous or that they experience economic hardship. Among a group of seven, three returned to Mexico due to economic hardship or dissatisfaction with their earnings potential in the U.S. Four of the seven have been arrested for vending in Los Angeles and have served time in a local jail in lieu of paying fines. All have had the pushcarts, fruit, and utensils confiscated by the Health Department

resulting in lost wages. All have been cited by the Health Department, Police Department or both and have had to pay hefty fines as a result. Only three were able to save enough money to purchase a used pick-up truck for work, one of those three lost his pick-up truck after not being able to pay for major repairs. The two others had trucks that featured some self-repair quirk (e.g. one used a screwdriver in the ignition to generate enough torque for a crank). Only one could afford to pay the monthly commissary rent to store his pushcart and even this was done intermittently. The rest stored their pushcarts in their own or other vendors' back yards. Five of the seven lived in overcrowded housing.<sup>28</sup> Two have owed more than \$2,000.00 to the wholesale fruit merchant. All had been compelled, at one point or another, to sell substandard fruit. All had borrowed money from friends or family due to insufficient funds. All reported not earning enough to make ends meet.

But how do these Dos Mundos migrants compare to other migrants from similar sending communities? Robert C. Smith's work offers an interesting comparison (2001; 2006). Smith also focuses on a population of *Poblano* migrants but some key distinctions led to vastly different trajectories. The Ticuani<sup>29</sup> migrants of Smith's study migrated to New York City and began to do so in the 1940s during WWII. The scarcity of workers during that time period meant that these Ticuani migrants were able to find ample work opportunities and, more than that, were welcomed with open arms. As a result, these migrants were able to establish a "tightly networked dynamic" that allowed others from Ticuani to benefit (Smith 2001: 279). While some of those Ticuani migrants entered the country illegally, their long-term unauthorized settlement was

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<sup>28</sup> Overcrowded housing is described here as more than one person per bedroom excluding romantic partners.

<sup>29</sup> This is a fictional name given to the sending community by Robert C. Smith.

granted amnesty with the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986.<sup>30</sup> Since then, Ticuani immigrants living in New York City have led “transnational lives” maintaining strong ties to their sending community in Mexico through economic remittances, civic engagement, and routine visits back.<sup>31</sup> For Dos Mundos migrants, their entry into the U.S. was characterized by a lack of job opportunities and took place in a period of increased border enforcement and rising deportations. Instead of migrants thriving in the U.S. and creating transnational lives by contributing to their sending community, for Dos Mundos migrants, ties to the sending community became avenues for exploitation and constrained economic advancement.

I identify two factors in these Dos Mundos migrants’ lives that help to explain why they have experienced such a negative trajectory. The first focuses on their sending community and its far-reaching influence. I argue that characteristics of the sending community help explain why these migrants enter into and remain in the informal and high-risk business of fruit vending. Dos Mundos is a small, semi-rural community about a 45-minute drive from the state capital of Puebla City. It is an emergent sending community even within a state (Puebla) and a country (Mexico) with a long history of migration to the United States. The sons that Dos Mundos sends abroad have fathers with very little experience working abroad or are the first in their family to leave the country. They leave with little information about the migration process. As a result, these migrants rely on underdeveloped social networks that are ineffective as conduits of diverse information and resources. Because previous Dos Mundos migrants have established themselves

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<sup>30</sup> IRCA granted amnesty to illegal immigrants who entered the United States before January 1, 1982 and had resided there continuously since.

<sup>31</sup> Transnational life “includes those practices and relationships linking migrants and their children with home country, where such practices have significant meaning and are regularly observed” (Smith 2006).

within the business of fruit vending, this occupation becomes the first, and often only, employment sought and received. Migrants enter into the work that they know with *paisanos* they are familiar with and become enmeshed in the life of street vending.

The second factor contributing to the negative outcomes in these migrants' lives is the cross-border competing interests that emerged and vied for their social and economic attention. I classify these competing interests into three general types: (1) Cost of living obligations vs. Family obligations, (2) US families vs. Mexico families and (3) Private sphere expenditures vs. Public sphere expenditures. In ideal circumstances vendors would be able to satisfy the needs of these paired competing interests. However, due to the financial constraints experienced throughout their tenure as street vendors, they often find themselves forced to choose one over another. I document how these competing interests first pull the financial resources of vendors in opposing directions and then show how the differential funding affects the subsequent social contact. It is important to note that the economic fortunes of vendors are always in flux and their decision to fund one interest over another is not fixed.

Of course, these two factors interacted with larger social forces including an economic recession, unprecedented waves of undocumented migration, and growing anti-immigrant sentiment. The Dos Mundos migrants I focus on in this chapter arrived between 1999 and 2005 (four arrived in 2005, one arrived in 2003, one arrived in 2002, and one arrived in 1999 returned to Mexico after six months and then entered into the U.S. four more times from 2002 to 2012 spending two years in the U.S. for every two to three months in Mexico). I started following the majority of these migrants in 2006. I visited Dos Mundos in July of 2011 to interview the parents and spouses of fruit vendors and to re-interview former vendors who returned to Mexico. By some markers, the economic decline began shortly after I first met these vendors in 2006. The



next year, 2007, saw a peak in the number of undocumented immigrants entering into the country from Mexico (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). The beginning of an economic decline combined with large waves of undocumented migration created a very competitive job market. For these migrants coming from Dos Mundos, street vending became not only a viable option but also one that had previous Dos Mundos migrants participating in it. However, these Dos Mundos migrants became trapped by the lack of options, the strength of (and obligations to) their social relationships, and the limited information their social network carried.

On a national scale, the years after 2007 began seeing a decline in migration from Mexico to the U.S. This was attributed to the bad economy, rising number of deportations, and increased instances of return migration. This, in turn, impacted the remittances that Mexican families were receiving from migrants in the U.S. Between 2007 and 2008, Mexico was documented a decline of \$2.5 billion dollars in remittances (González Amador 2008; Wilson 2009). The state of Puebla was one among ten Mexican states severely impacted by this decline (Franco 2008; Wilson 2009). Then, in mid-April of 2012, the Pew Hispanic Center issued a report stating that after four decades of steady migration from Mexico, the net migration flow into the U.S. had stopped and perhaps even reversed (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). This chapter offers one ground-level account of these larger trends within the fruit vendor population. However, in assessing these migrants' social and economic lives I introduce another important component that is neglected in large-scale analyses. I argue that the close examination of these migrants' lives offers new insight into the impact and influence of an important variable: the sending community.

## **The Sending Community of Dos Mundos**

Dos Mundos is a small, semi-rural town located in the southern Mexican state of Puebla with a population of about 1,500 people (estimate given by vendor). A walk through this town reveals a kind of stunted growth: half-built homes lay in wait and allow weeds to take up residence, piles of bricks for would-be home improvements sit untouched in yards. These unfinished homes are the physical manifestation of a larger crisis that Dos Mundos migrants working abroad are facing. Dos Mundos is a town where people live, but do not work. For residents, work can be found either in the outskirts of town, in other cities, or farther to the north in the United States. Some residents work in the neighboring *milpa* (corn) fields and earn 100 to 150 pesos for a 12-hour workday. A few others graze their livestock in the rolling fields beyond the town's border. Women looking for better wages travel to Puebla City — a 45-minute bus ride away—and work in service sector occupations and wash clothes or clean homes. Those who work in Puebla City leave town in the pre-dawn hours and return late on the evening bus. Men take on construction work in Puebla City or leave Dos Mundos for week or month-long stretches and take construction jobs in Mexico City or Monterrey. Several other men have left Dos Mundos for the United States and have landed in Los Angeles working as fruit vendors. In this section I will show how their process of migration from the decision to leave Dos Mundos, to crossing the border clandestinely, to finding work as a fruit vendor, and later being exploited by key players is structured by connections to the sending community. As such, I argue that the sending community affects migrant trajectories abroad.

### ***Hurried and Joint Departures***

Dos Mundos migrants entering into the United States are at a disadvantage compared to migrants coming from well-established sending communities. The journey north is largely

structured by information passed on through social networks. Within Dos Mundos, the social networks that do exist are limited in size and scope. Dos Mundos does not have a long history of sending migrants north. In many instances, the young men migrating north were the first in their families to leave home for the United States or have fathers with very limited international migration experience. Information about the journey was not passed on from father to son or from relatives already in the United States, instead, in most cases, neighbors and friends used the limited information they had to make life-changing decisions and often decided to travel north quickly, as if on a whim. The limited information that the family unit carries is similar to the limited information Dos Mundos networks carry. Because Dos Mundos networks are an aggregate of family units, if each household unit carries little or redundant information then the overall strength of the hometown community network is weakened.

Don Tomas and Doña Agustina, Cristian's parents, were reticent to let their only son leave Dos Mundos. As Doña Agustina explained, Cristian's decision to leave was based on a chance encounter in a neighborhood store:

It was only about a week or four days [that I had between his decision to leave and him leaving]. One day he went to pay a bill and saw the neighbor and the neighbor told him he was leaving [to the U.S.] and Cristian came home and said, 'you know what mom, I'm going to go.' A day before he was supposed to leave I told him, 'son, would it be too much to ask you to not leave? Don't leave,' and he said, 'I'm going to work, to have a better life.' I told him, 'No son, that's not true. Your father never left and thanks to God we've done something here.' [Cristian] said he wanted to know how things were, he [told me he] was going to go only for a year.

The interview with Doña Agustina and Don Tomas highlight a few important things. First, Cristian's decision to leave Dos Mundos was neither premeditated nor supported by either of his parents. Second, his departure was based largely on information his neighbor had and not on information he himself had gathered in anticipation of the trip. Finally, in an effort to convince

Cristian not to go, Doña Agustina referenced her own husband, Tomas, who had never left either Dos Mundos or Mexico to seek a better life with money earned abroad.

Jesús' departure from Dos Mundos, like Cristian's, was abrupt. When his wife began suffering convulsions in the middle of her second pregnancy, he came to work in the U.S. in order to earn the money necessary to pay for his wife's medical treatment. I interviewed Doña Serafina, Jesús' mother, about his departure. She explained that there was no choice and Jesús left in such a hurry that they had to pool money from neighbors in order to finance the trip. Doña Serafina's husband had traveled to the U.S. once, but that trip was done early in their marriage and his stay in Los Angeles had lasted only 7 months and was done nearly two decades before Jesús decided to travel north himself. Migration into the U.S. changed drastically in the 20 years between the time Jesús' father traveled to the U.S. and when Jesús traveled there himself. Not only was undocumented entry more difficult for Jesús, but also the jobs readily available to undocumented immigrants were markedly different and included far more competition from other undocumented job seekers.

Many Dos Mundos migrants decide to travel to the U.S. on a whim; in fact, few of the vendors I interviewed throughout my time in the field had taken more than a few days to decide to leave Mexico. As a result of the little planning that goes into such a great journey, these migrants are exposed to various kinds of danger and exploitation as they travel north. Dos Mundos migrants typically travel north with other Dos Mundos companions (friends, relatives, neighbors). This allows them some safety and security in the process of hiring an unknown *coyote* to cross them over illegally. And while these Dos Mundos migrants do meet and travel with other migrants at various stages of the journey, the only trusting relationship they have is with their Dos Mundos *paisanos*.

### ***Limited Job Prospects Upon Arrival***

Manuel left Dos Mundos for the U.S. in 2005 when he was 16 years old. Prior to leaving, his work experience included picking *maize* in the fields just beyond the town. For this work he earned \$50 Mexican pesos a day (roughly \$5 USD). Manuel's grandmother, Doña Josefina, asked two of her former neighbors in Dos Mundos who were living in Fresno for help with Manuel's trip north. Based on his previous experience working in the fields, the couple agreed to finance Manuel's trip north and find him a job with them picking various crops. Patricia, Manuel's aunt, noted that, "Manuel left [Dos Mundos] on a Thursday and by Sunday he was working in the fields of Fresno." Manuel found the work intense but was good at it; Doña Josefina noted that the couple that had hired Manuel in Fresno always spoke well of him and his strong work ethic. After working in Fresno for a year, Manuel convinced his uncle, Marcos, and another neighbor, Solomon, to leave Dos Mundos and join him. Marcos and Solomon left Dos Mundos and also worked in the fields of Fresno picking crops and knew of no other job prospects in the U.S. Ultimately though, the labor-intensive work and the limited opportunities for excitement in central California wore on Manuel, Marcos, and Solomon and they decided to reach out to *paisanos* living and working in Los Angeles.

The opportunities available to Manuel, Marcos, and Solomon were structured by who they knew in Los Angeles (only fellow *paisanos*) and the resources and information those *paisanos* held. When Manuel reached out to his social network, he found that the only job prospects were in fruit vending where a group of his fellow *paisanos* were clustered. Within this sector, Manuel and his friends were offered an opportunity to work for Gabriel, a former Dos Mundos neighbor they all knew. Given the increased risk of capture and deportation associated with movement between major cities for undocumented migrants, Manuel calculated that his

movement from Fresno to Los Angeles with some job security was a risk worth taking. What he did not calculate was that his experience working with Gabriel would be unpleasant. Still, even then his options were structured by whom he knew, the information and resources they had, and skills he had acquired.

Cristian left Dos Mundos with his neighbor and arrived in Utah in March of 2004 to work in construction with his neighbor's brother and his own distant cousins. He was 20 years old. He worked for six months without pay. He was offered room and board but he had no income. He had depended on his neighbor's brother and some distant cousins to provide him with work and housing but these connections had done little to prevent him from being exploited. After six months, Cristian and his neighbor left Utah. They went directly to Los Angeles to work with Gabriel, Cristian's distant cousin, in the fruit vending business. However, by the time they arrived in Los Angeles, the pushcarts he was meant to work out of had been confiscated by the Health Department. Cristian was unemployed and without income for an additional month in Los Angeles. Cristian eventually found work with another fruit vendor (Carmen's uncle). While Cristian did have *paisanos* and distant cousins to connect with in the U.S., they were all recent arrivals and thus vulnerable to scams carried out by unscrupulous employers. Given the circumstances under which Cristian left Dos Mundos, he was almost certainly set up to experience hardship and exploitation.

Jesús arrived in Los Angeles in 2006 with the intention of working as a fruit vendor for a former neighbor. He was 21 years old. Jesús worked for a year with Gabriel, a Dos Mundos *paisano*, though he was unhappy with this arrangement because Gabriel had a very bad temper and made for a very unpleasant work environment. When I interviewed Jesús in Los Angeles in 2007 he was quick to describe his workplace atmosphere:

[Gabriel's bad temper] that's what I didn't like. Sometimes you had everything ready and [he'd still yell at you]. He had his girlfriend and sometimes on Saturdays or Fridays he'd go out dancing and ... the next day, because he knew the man who sold fruit, he would just make the [wholesale fruit] order on the telephone and then it would be delivered and we had to have the carts ready to go out at 8:30 AM. There were days when he would stay asleep and ask for the fruit and the fruit would get there at 8:30 or 8AM and then he would get up with his bad character and [yell at us]. Everything bothered him and if I answered back something well [shakes head]. You would try to explain that the fruit had just arrived and that you didn't have anything to prepare and he didn't care... [It takes an hour or an hour and a half to get the carts ready] so we wouldn't have enough time. He'd come out all angry, yelling 'Hurry up!' And sometimes—since that's just the way we got along—sometimes cussing.

After working for Gabriel for a year Jesús was finally presented with an opportunity to leave this work arrangement. During a large crackdown, the health department confiscated eight pushcarts belonging to Gabriel and his brother Benjamin. Using this as an excuse, Jesús went to work with his cousin Cristian. Jesús was so eager to leave Gabriel that he worked out an arrangement sharing a pushcart with Cristian and working every other week.

Jesús was a victim of limited job prospects, underdeveloped social networks, and extenuating circumstances. Dos Mundos affected the opportunities available to Jesús. Had his town been larger—more urban or metropolitan—and with a more diverse stream of migrants, his social network would have included more “weak” and “strong ties” to migrants working in different types of occupations (Granovetter 1973). Jesús might have had different job prospects in the United States. However, what and whom he knew was limited because of where he came from. He found a job working with an abusive *paisano* and later, when he was able to leave, moved into the same type of work with another *paisano* and took a pay cut (due to his sharing of the pushcart). Jesús did not have much personal incentive to find a better job because he expected to return to Mexico as soon as he met his target earnings. In the end, Jesús stayed in Los Angeles for three years and five months before returning to Dos Mundos. When I visited in

2011 he was working a month-long construction job and was based in Monterrey. I spoke to him on the phone from his mother's home in Dos Mundos and he told me he had no plans of ever returning to the U.S.

### ***Exploitation and Predatory Practices***

For all of these vendors, the *paisano* connections they had to Gabriel in the fruit vending business became a liability. They were forced to enter a job because of whom they knew and whom they thought they could trust. The outcomes for all of them following their employment under Gabriel were negative. For a time, Gabriel did not pay Cristian and Jesús. In this same time period, Gabriel was purchasing lots of land in Dos Mundos and it was rumored among the vendors that the money being used to purchase that land was the money that he had not been paying them in wages. Gabriel and his brothers Benjamin and Omar exploited their Dos Mundos vendor employees in order to get ahead. Within Dos Mundos, there were no visible repercussions when Gabriel, Benjamin, and Omar did not pay their workers. Within Dos Mundos their family owned the largest houses and operated the two maize mills—which everyone depended on for their food staple.

In a similar vein, Yolanda, the wholesale fruit merchant, benefitted from these fruit vendors. Yolanda was also a fellow *paisana* from the same county as these Dos Mundos vendors. Yolanda extended credit to Manuel when hard times hit. When I interviewed Yolanda, the wholesale market owner, she noted that if Manuel ever disappeared without paying what he owed she knew how to find his family in Mexico and exert pressure through that end. Yolanda believed that these migrants worked as fruit vendors because it was “the only thing they know how to do.” In a way, Yolanda's business thrived on these migrants' stubborn commitment to fruit vending. She profited from their inability and unwillingness to seek alternative employment



and from the increasing debt they accumulated with her. She organized her business around the weaknesses of these vendors' social networks and the dearth of information they carried and was making a steady living at it. Yolanda did not charge them interest but felt that debts owed to would help keep them loyal. Even if these *frutereros* had tried to leave the business, they had few options in the tight labor market. They were also firmly embedded in vendor social networks that might provide aid if they needed it and would lose these in another occupation.

In summary, these migrants leave Dos Mundos quickly and often without much planning. Other Dos Mundos residents provide loans and thus sponsor their journey. As a result of the limited planning, their journey north, in the company of other *paisanos*, becomes a co-dependent one. When they arrive in the U.S. they are limited by whom they know and the jobs those people have to offer. It is here that *paisano* networks become a liability. Within the Los Angeles fruit vending business, two key actors benefited from these migrants: Gabriel as an exploitative boss and Yolanda as a predatory wholesale fruit merchant. The journey north and entry into the informal economy of fruit vending offers some insight into the exploitative nature of social networks structured around sending community relations.

### **Cross-border Competing Interests**

While the previous section showed how migrants from Dos Mundos get funneled into and later trapped in the occupation of fruit vending. This section shows how competing interests vie for the vendors' limited resources. I document how cross-border social and economic contact between vendors in Los Angeles and their families in Mexico is affected by the circumstances they encounter in the U.S. Economic contact refers to the monetary remittances that flow between vendors in the U.S. and their families in Dos Mundos. Social contact refers to the communication, largely via telephone, that takes place between the two groups. In most

instances, and largely due to their greater financial resources, it is the migrants in the U.S. who dictate the extent of the communication. Because the person who initiates conversation is largely responsible for the international calling charges, families in Mexico are largely dependent on the vendors to make contact. Therefore, the U.S.-based migrant largely controls the majority of the cross-border social and economic contact. I argue that the hardship vendors experience in the U.S. leads to difficult decision-making processes in which competing interests arise. These competing interests vie for vendors' finite economic and social attention. I classify these competing interests into three types: (1) Personal obligations vs. Family obligations, (2) U.S. families vs. Mexico families, (3) Private sphere expenditures vs. Public sphere expenditures. I present three cases for the first set of competing interests—the most common—and one case for each of the other two competing interests.

### ***Cost of Living vs. Family Obligations***

Cost of living expenses in the U.S. include those expenses a vendor must make in order to secure his or her own livelihood. These expenses range from room and board to cell phone payments to citation fees and jail fines. Family obligations include the monetary allowances that families in Mexico expect or would like to receive and that fruit vendors expect or would like to give. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but due to financial constraints vendors are often compelled to pick one over the other. Though most vendors do experience financial hardship, this does not mean that cost of living obligations always triumph over family obligations. The types of families left behind in Mexico often dictated whether vendors choose to fund personal cost of living or family obligations. For example, those with spouses and children often came to the U.S. in order to build a better life for their families in Mexico and therefore were more likely to pick family obligations over personal cost of living obligations. Young and

unattached vendors with parents and/or siblings in Mexico had hopes of remitting to their families but when confronted with a choice often picked personal cost of living obligations over family obligations. Parents of these young and unattached vendors also often had tempered expectations of financial contributions from their sons and daughters abroad.<sup>32</sup> When asked why they choose to migrate to the U.S., young and unattached vendors often stated a desire for personal advancement and adventure.

Cristian left Dos Mundos for the U.S. in 2004; he was 20 years old and had no wife or children in Mexico. Cristian's primary reason for migrating was not to remit to his parents; in fact, his parents were well established in a three-bedroom home and had discouraged him from migrating. However Cristian sought adventure north of the border. His reasons for leaving Dos Mundos were rooted in a sense of curiosity. Cristian's mother explained that in the days leading to his departure Cristian was excited:

He had that enthusiasm, he wanted to know Los Angeles because they would tell him that over there you could earn a lot of money and I don't know what else. And I would tell him, "Don't leave, I'm going to miss you. You don't just sweep up the money over there, you have to work like you do here." And well, it didn't work, he already carried that hope and excitement and when that young man [a neighbor] told him he was going and invited him [Cristian], my son said, "Let's go!" and he left.

For these reasons, Cristian's parents had tempered expectations regarding any remittances he might send. And, given the misfortune Cristian encountered in the U.S., they were correct to expect little. Cristian did not have steady income for several months when he first arrived.

Understandably, during this period Cristian did not remit. In fact, for the first year and a half that he was in the U.S. Cristian did not send home any money at all. The remittances he eventually

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<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that parents expressed this sentiment *after* their migrant sons and daughters failed to remit – expectations might have been tempered because of the lack of remittances and not necessarily before their children left their homes in Mexico.

sent his parents were always small in quantity and distant in frequency. As Cristian's mother, Agustina, explained, times were difficult for her son:

For a year and a half he just couldn't [send any money]. Then [after Utah] he began working in the fruit business and he couldn't make ends meet. They [health department] would toss his fruit, he would have to go to court to pay tickets. He would tell me, "mom, I have to pay off citations, they take my fruit away. The situation here is ugly."

During this time, Cristian's family gave up on any expectations they might have had regarding financial contributions from their son and instead began worrying about his personal livelihood. When asked how much he would send when he did remit, Agustina simply stated that it was not much and then added, "I'm going to be sincere. There were times when he'd send \$600.00 pesos or \$800.00 or \$1,500.00 even as high as \$2,000.00 pesos.<sup>33</sup> I'm not going to say he sent me some big fortunes." In fact, these remittances were augmented at times by contributions from Carmen – who dated and lived with Cristian in Los Angeles. While the family was aware of these contributions from Carmen, they did not mention it in our interviews. I had witnessed Carmen's monetary additions while running errands with her and Cristian in Los Angeles.

An added unintended consequence of Cristian's misfortune in Utah and later in Los Angeles was a loss of contact with his family in Dos Mundos. In the six months he was in Utah he was able to call home only a few times; not having any income whatsoever prevented him from being able to buy phone cards to call home. For seven months, Cristian's parents fretted. And though he had promised his mother he would only stay a year, financial troubles and encounters with the police and health department constantly derailed his plans of saving money and returning home.

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<sup>33</sup> The Mexican peso (MXN) to US Dollar (USD) exchange rate has fluctuated in the years between 2006 and 2011. January 2006 saw \$10.50MXN to \$1USD; August 2008 saw \$10.12MXN to \$1USD; July 2011 saw \$11.67MXN to \$1USD.

Cristian was overwhelmed by the financial hardship he experienced in the U.S. and had to divert all his financial attention to his personal cost of living obligations. In doing so he neglected most of the obligations he had to his parents and younger siblings in Dos Mundos. His decision to provide for his own livelihood was not frowned upon by family in Mexico because he had migrated to the U.S. for personal reasons. Still, Cristian was unhappy that he could not send his parents more money and often expressed to me that he wished he could send more money and do so more frequently. Cristian's hardship not only impacted the economic contact he had with his family but also the social contact. Because of his dire circumstances when he first arrived in the U.S., Cristian could not establish or maintain contact with his family in Dos Mundos. He did not have the money necessary to pay for calling cards and on the very few occasions when he did call, he depended on the calling card minutes of friends or cousins. The lack of social contact was more striking to Cristian's parents than his lack of economic contact; his parents worried about his well-being and constantly wondered what they could have done to prevent him from leaving. Ultimately, Cristian's feelings of homesickness, exacerbated by his economic instability and his limited social contact, provoked his sudden return to Dos Mundos after spending four years in the U.S.

Jesús left Dos Mundos to help his family, specifically his ailing pregnant wife. His decision to fund family obligations over personal cost of living obligations was predetermined. However, with Gabriel as his boss, Jesús had a very unpleasant work environment and suffered as a consequence. His mother, Doña Serafina, knew of the hardship Jesús experienced during his time working in Los Angeles and for Gabriel and was saddened by it:

[He would tell me that] it was difficult. He couldn't find himself. He'd slice his fingers [while working] because he didn't know how to do it. And he'd tell me he wanted to return, but necessity would make him stay there. He always, always told me he wanted to return.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, Jesús was arrested several times for working as a fruit vendor and, at one point, found himself begging for change on the street. Jesús did not have many options when he came to the United States—the job working as fruit vendor had been offered and accepted even before he arrived in Los Angeles. While this long-distance recruitment and job acquisition does reveal a potentially positive side of social network use, Jesús was unhappy working for this *paisano* boss and felt that he could not quit based on this unhappiness alone. Jesús only had a passing acquaintanceship with Gabriel in Dos Mundos before working for him in Los Angeles and he did not know and was not told that Gabriel was a bad boss. Jesús earned \$50 a day for his work but was constantly berated. He was trapped in this job for several reasons including an obligation to pay for his wife's medical expenses. Jesús regularly sent money to his wife at the expense of his own cost of living expenses. He also stayed in touch with his family, diverting funds to buy calling cards and, later, a cell phone. The entire time he lived in the U.S., Jesús shared a bedroom with one or two male companions in an effort to keep his rent down. He almost never went out drinking and when he did, it was Carmen and Cristian who paid the bill.

Jesús was compelled to migrate to the U.S. and to remit to his family. He sent the majority of his limited income to his wife. He was constantly homesick and dealt with this by calling his family as much as possible which further depleted his income. A bad working environment and short-tempered boss only made matters worse. Jesús was unable to pay for his personal expenses, including the citation fees that he incurred. He thus depended on his boss to pay the fines when he was arrested. On one occasion, his boss refused to pay this fine and forced Jesús to serve time in jail in lieu of payment. His miserable existence in Los Angeles ultimately led to his permanent return to Dos Mundos.

Domingo also left a wife and children behind in Dos Mundos but he was much older than Jesús when he did so. Domingo was in his late 30s when he first traveled to Los Angeles in 1999 and 47 years old when I interviewed him in 2010. And while Domingo also funded familial obligations over cost of living obligations and lived a very austere life in Los Angeles, it was nonetheless punctuated by periodic trips back to his family and home in Mexico. Domingo has been married for 22 years and throughout his marriage he has migrated to the U.S. to work—he has entered the U.S. as an undocumented migrant five times since 1999.<sup>34</sup> Domingo belongs to an older generation of migrants who routinely moved back and forth across the international border—something that increased border enforcement and the drug war in northern Mexico have made less common among younger migrants.

The multiple trips Domingo made into the U.S. allowed him to steadily fund the construction of a home in Dos Mundos over a period of 6 years. Domingo benefited from several factors in order to do this. He started migrating into the U.S. several years before the economic recession hit. When Domingo first arrived, he worked as a street vendor selling roasted corn and explained to me that in the early days he was more profitable because there was not as much competition in the streets and, as a result, there were fewer large-scale crackdowns. Domingo was a trailblazer among Dos Mundos migrants and was profitable as a result. However, later when other Dos Mundos migrated north and firmly established themselves within the fruit vending business, Domingo fell into the occupation as well. His movement into the U.S. became structured by what other Dos Mundos migrants were doing. Becoming a fruit vendor was the path of least resistance but with it came all the pitfalls of the high risk, high visibility, high

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<sup>34</sup> Starting in 2002 Domingo would return to Mexico for short stretches lasting between 15 days to 3 months and then leave to work in the US for 2 to 3 year stretches. When he first entered the country in 1999 he only stayed 6 months.

competition occupation. In a sense, Domingo was worse off as a result of his *paisano* connections. When I interviewed him in 2010 he, like the other fruit vendors, was struggling.

Despite the hardship he was experiencing as a result of an economic recession, increased competition from other vendors, and increased health department crackdowns, Domingo sent his family money every week. Admittedly, it was less than he was able to send in years past. His wife Reina explained that when he first left, Domingo would regularly send about \$5,000 pesos every week and today (in 2011) he sends between \$1,000-2,000 Mexican pesos per week, as she noted “it’s a big financial crisis [*bastante crisis*].” Reina noted that her husband’s commitment to the family had never faltered:

The thing is he’s never forgotten about his family. He’s constant. He calls often and asks what we need and how we are doing. I don’t know how he does it but he never lets our bills go unpaid. He’s always with us.

Domingo had to make great sacrifices to help his family get ahead. In Los Angeles he regularly works 7 days a week, weather permitting. When I interviewed him in 2010, he lived in a three bedroom home he shared with four other men, the house located directly behind his and on the same lot was a two bedroom house where another five men lived—nine of the ten men living in these two homes were fruit vendors. He paid about \$200.00 in rent per month. But things were becoming worse for Domingo:

It’s just that, things are getting harder over here, Miss. To be honest, I don’t see any future here, before you were able to but now, the situation with the rents and all of those owners that lost their homes. How many people are returning to Mexico?

Because Domingo had been migrating between Dos Mundos and Los Angeles since 1999, he was able to establish friendships with fellow *paisanos*. These relationships allowed him to secure group housing with a low monthly rent and he always had a job waiting for him as a fruit vendor when he returned to the U.S. These friends often also loaned him the money necessary to finance



his re-entry into the country (*coyote* fees). When Domingo first started vending fruit in 2002, he also had less competition from other street vendors. All the vendors I interviewed stated there had been a surge in the number of street vendors in the last few years. Steady employment and a strong work ethic had allowed Domingo to provide for his family. While life in Los Angeles was characterized by non-stop work and overcrowded housing he was able to seek sanctuary by retreating to his home in Mexico. Not only did Domingo remit regularly, he also maintained routine contact and was able to provide more financial assistance if needs arose. While Domingo acknowledged that times were getting tough, he had no definite plans to leave Los Angeles or alter his cyclical migration.

Cristian experienced so much financial hardship that his remittances decreased when he diverted income to pay for his living expenses in the U.S. However, his migration north was not structured around providing aid to his parents. He had no wife or children depending on his financial support in Mexico. His journey north was about adventure. Unlike Cristian, Jesús and Domingo did have family obligations. Their migration north was meant to improve their families' circumstances in Mexico. Whenever possible Jesús and Domingo diverted funds from their personal cost of living expenses to their Mexico-based families. As a result, the lives that Jesús and Domingo had in Los Angeles were very austere.

### ***U.S. Families vs. Mexico Families***

A migrant's extended stay in the U.S. can lead to the development of new romantic partnerships. These romantic partnerships, in turn, can lead to the creation of new families. In those instances, the competing interests vying for a vendor's economic and social attention become the U.S.-based and Mexico-based families. A parent or two migrating to the U.S. for the benefit of their children is a common practice among many Third World populations (Abrego

2009; Parreñas 2008). When parents abroad form new romantic relationships, remittances can be affected. Interestingly, Abrego found that father-away families tended to suffer when new romantic relationships were established abroad while mother-away families continued to receive consistent remittances. As she notes with regards to the Salvadoran case, immigrant men “tended to decrease or discontinue remittances because of their own or their ex-partners’ new relationships” (Abrego 2009: 1080). Joanna Dreby (2006; 2009) found similar instances of neglect among Mexican fathers who had migrated to the U.S. and established new romantic relationships. In this section I track how those diminishing remittances are experienced and explained by the Mexico-based spouse and the U.S.-based migrant.

In 2011, Mateo had been living in Los Angeles, without returning to Dos Mundos, for nine years. He was in his early 40s and had a wife and three sons in Mexico. When he first arrived in the U.S., Mateo sent money regularly to Mexico and was able to finance the construction of a house for his family. However, over the course of his stay, Mateo had partnered with another woman. When I met Mateo, he lived in Los Angeles with a common-law wife and her son. Mateo had initially left Mexico due to need, as Veronica, his wife in Dos Mundos, explained to me, they had nothing as a young married couple:

He didn’t think much about it before leaving. At the time his brother was over there. Since then his brother has returned but at that time the brother would tell him to go, to make something for himself. And [my husband] told me, “I’m leaving so I can help you here.” When he left he’d send me money often and we slowly built this house. We didn’t have a house before. When we married we lived in small room my mother-in-law lent us.

Throughout the years, the financial remittances decreased and with them so too did the amount of social contact between Mateo and his Dos Mundos family. It was unclear whether Veronica knew of her husband’s new family in Los Angeles but she seemed resigned to the new arrangements. In explaining the decreased social and economic contact, Veronica stated:

Well, how should I tell you. Well, he does send, so, I mean he doesn't send much but he does send something every so often. [Before he'd send more] because, well, he says things are not the same anymore. He says there are low sales, that rain prevents him from selling. That's what he tells us at least. But yes, he used to send more. More money. I also understand that things are difficult, we see the news and how it is in California. And you can see about the crisis and all that.

Many vendors in Los Angeles have said that competition has worsened among fruit vendors throughout the years and that this has impacted profits. Because of an increased street vendor presence, health department crackdowns were likely intensified. When I spoke to Mateo in Los Angeles he did seem to be struggling. He was struggling to pay off citations and stored his carts in his backyard as opposed to paying monthly rental fees to store his carts at a storage commissary. Other vendors criticized Mateo for selling fruit that was not fresh in his effort to conserve money—this carelessness, they believed, might impact the perception customers had of fruit vendors and their product. Carmen often worried that if customers got sick eating Mateo's fruit salads, they might complain to the health department and provoke a crackdown. Still, Carmen never openly criticized Mateo and even if she did, she would and could not do anything to solve his financial problems. If the financial strain had increased due to competition, it was also not helped by the two families that Mateo had on both sides of the border.

Mateo's common-law wife in Los Angeles was also a fruit vendor and both of them would prepare their pushcarts together in the early mornings. One morning, during a period when Manuel was storing his cart in Mateo's backyard, Mateo's common-law wife told me that times were difficult for them and they could not even imagine paying the monthly fees to store their carts in a commissary. Mateo and his wife owned pushcarts that looked very beaten up; they were the small pirated types of carts that were ineligible for commissary storage. Even if they did have the money to pay for storage, they would likely have to make a sizeable investment in new

carts with drainage systems. It was clear that Mateo and his common-law wife were not thriving; they lived in a small one-bedroom bungalow packed wall to wall with clothes, boxes, and knickknacks.

The limited resources Mateo had were split between his two families, not allowing either to thrive. However, given the investment he had already made in order to build a home in Dos Mundos, he had begun to neglect his Mexico-based family. Remittances were less frequent and so were his calls to his family. This neglect extended to Mateo's oldest son, Jaime, who had migrated from Dos Mundos to Los Angeles. Though Jaime had been able to secure a job as a fruit vendor, he did so by seeking help from *paisanos* and not from his father. Mateo and Jaime lived in different parts of the city and rarely saw or talked to each other. This might have been due to Jaime's disapproval of Mateo's U.S.-based family or to Mateo's inability to offer financial assistance to his son.

### ***Private Sphere Expenditures vs. Public Sphere Expenditures***

Finally, there are the remittances that vendors send to Mexico to cover private sphere expenditures such as home improvement projects or the construction of private dwellings and those remittances to cover public sphere expenditures such as hometown infrastructure projects or to fund hometown festivities. Public sphere expenditures are often hefty financial obligations. In order to raise these public sphere funds, the town of Dos Mundos nominates migrants to serve on one of two ministries. Each of these ministries consists of 70 members and includes people who live in the U.S. as well as in Dos Mundos. The priest from the town parish heads one group and the mayor of Dos Mundos heads the other. They form two groups and compete against each other in an effort to raise more money. These ministries, a variant of Hometown Associations (HTAs), are responsible for raising funds for the benefit of the hometown. In other towns, these

Hometown Associations are responsible for infrastructure projects such as the paving of roads, construction of drainage systems, or the building of town plazas (Moya 2005; Smith 2006). In Dos Mundos, these ministries currently raise money meant for town festivities and their accompanying costs (see Figure 5).<sup>35</sup>

Scholars have written extensively about migrants in the U.S. who are able to translate their economic success in the host country into improved circumstances in their sending community via HTAs (Orozco 2002; Orozco 2003; Orozco and Lapointe 2004; Zabin and Escala 2002). These HTAs began to grow in number during the 1990s; during this same time period, “family remittances also increased and motivated HTAs to pay greater attention to the need for economic aid in their homelands” (Orozco 2002: 88). Mexican HTAs were among the most successful and best-known examples of migrant involvement in sending communities (Orozco 2002). Los Angeles, in particular, is the region with the highest concentration of Mexican immigrants and Mexican HTAs in the United States (Zabin and Escala 2002). HTAs are composed almost entirely of first-generation immigrants; their purpose is to bring people from the same town or state in the sending country together in the receiving state. In doing so, these groups of people are able to create social and economic links to their hometown, promote social exchange, exercise structured political influence, pursue low-scale development goals, and retain a sense of community as they adjust to life in the U.S. (Orozco 2002).

Academics focusing on HTAs are overwhelmingly positive in their assessments of these types of organizations and their influence, some have even noted that they might promote political participation and empowerment not only within Mexico but in the U.S. (Zabin and Escala 2002). Scholars largely consider the relationship between HTAs and sending communities

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<sup>35</sup> As of May 2012, the LA-based members of this ministry had \$10,000.00 USD saved that they wished to use to build public restrooms for use during the town festivities. While the men had talked about this possible project, no planning had officially started.

to be mutually beneficial. However, most studies on HTAs focus on the size and impact of the contributions to the sending community, they rarely focus on individual HTA members and how their involvement in such an organization can impact their personal livelihood. The following case presents one such individual and analyzes the burdensome side of hometown-bound remittances.

Manuel, who had been struggling for years in Los Angeles, was elected to be on a board of ministers in Dos Mundos in 2008. Membership and involvement with a ministry runs for six years. Members are expected to make contributions between \$200.00 and \$600.00 USD about four times a year. After the six-year term ends, Dos Mundos migrants are expected to make only one contribution a year in May for the patron saint festival, this donation is typically about \$500.00 USD. Despite his constant run-ins with the LAPD, routine harassment and confiscations by the LAHD, and a rising debt owed to a wholesale fruit merchant, Manuel never faltered in his hometown ministry contributions. When he was asked to serve on the committee for his hometown he accepted and considered it an honor to be selected. However, the required financial contributions were a strain on Manuel who often put these remittances ahead of remittances to his family.

The financial need of Manuel's family in Mexico was great and this was not lost on him. In the first few years I knew him, Manuel did not talk much about life in his hometown. However, when I began to think about visiting and interviewing family members in Mexico, Manuel began opening up about the circumstances back home. Manuel even arranged for me to stay with his grandmother, Doña Josefina, in Dos Mundos. As the date of my departure approached, Manuel began revealing more details in an effort to, as he noted, "prepare me" for the poverty I was to encounter. One evening as Carmen and I sat in the small bedroom of a

somewhat dilapidated home he rented in south central Los Angeles with two other men, Manuel said “we’re very poor people there [in Dos Mundos], not poor like what you see here.” Then he pointed to the restroom just beyond his bedroom door, “there’s no running water [at the house where you will stay], we use an outhouse and you shower with buckets of water in it.”

Admittedly, Manuel had left Dos Mundos in order to improve life for his grandmother in Mexico but had been unable to do so in the years he had been in the US.

Manuel had promised to build his grandmother a suitable kitchen to replace a wooden shack housing a fire pit that was currently located next to her one room cinderblock home. He had also promised his grandmother he’d build a bigger house on the plot of land the family owned. When I visited Dos Mundos I stayed with Manuel’s grandmother. One day as we were walking through the back part of the family lot, Doña Josefina pointed to a small pile of bricks lined up against a neighbor’s wall and told me she had bought them with the money Manuel had sent her. She told me those bricks were for the house Manuel was going to build. Those bricks represented the seven years Manuel had spent working abroad and were now little more than props in the children’s game of long jump. Later, when I asked Doña Josefina about the money Manuel sent, she explained that it was not much but that in his remittances for town projects he never failed:

[Manuel sends money] about every two months. Or more. Sometimes he doesn’t send at all. But it’s because he says he doesn’t have enough [*no le alcanza*]. He tells me, “I have to pay electricity, water, rent” and I tell him, “Work so that you can maintain yourself, so that you can eat”. He does send for—well, because he’s an elected town minister on the Church committee—for the day of the festival. That he does. Since he’s part of the group of elected ministers he’s committed to sending money for the week-long [hometown] saint’s festival or for the New Year [festivities] or for the Holy Week [festivals]... They [migrants abroad] send money for food, to feed the musicians, to pay the musicians. The New Year contribution is bigger, because for New Year they get food, and hire different bands to play. That’s the time when they send more money.

Manuel never missed a payment with the hometown ministry because he wanted to save face among his *paisanos* in Los Angeles and back in Dos Mundos. Even within an occupation riddled with unexpected financial calamity, vendors in Los Angeles had very low regard for those migrants among them who failed to meet these hometown association's financial obligations. Members of the committee were expected to be responsible providers for the town of Dos Mundos and election into the committee was recognition of their time (and thus success) abroad. If a member failed to meet his committee's obligations, the group ridiculed him. Manuel avoided this ridicule by forsaking his family's private sphere construction needs. So while his was among the poorest homes in Dos Mundos with a migrant son working in the U.S., his reputation as a contributing member of the hometown association remained untarnished.

Not being able to remit to Doña Josefina's household did exact an emotional toll on Manuel who felt embarrassed and ashamed about the neglect. And although Doña Josefina understood that times were difficult, Manuel nonetheless would call less often when he had not sent his grandmother money. When Manuel first migrated to the U.S. he landed in Fresno working in the fields picking various crops. The work was labor intensive but the pay was steady. He regularly remitted and called his grandmother often. When he moved to Los Angeles he began experiencing hardship as a vendor. Remittances to his grandmother decreased and so did the calls. Doña Josefina interpreted this decrease in contact as Manuel forsaking her and thought that he had become romantically involved with someone and started a new life for himself in the U.S. She did not know that Manuel's lack of contact was tied up with his feelings of shame that resulted from not remitting.

Manuel noted that because most of the Los Angeles-based ministers were fruit vendors, they could apply social pressure to keep the funds coming. Serving as a minister was something



that was expected from Dos Mundos men and entrance into the ministry typically came when the men reached working age (16 or 18 years old) or when they got married. However, there were Los Angeles-based Dos Mundos migrants who did not participate either in the ministries or in the yearly donations. These people were often not fruit vendors and worked in different occupations apart from their *paisanos*. Manuel knew of one man, a manager at a downtown store, who had distanced himself from the rest of the Dos Mundos group. In opting out of the hometown donations, this man also opted out of any other help he might have received from his fellow *paisanos*. For example, if this man had ever asked another Dos Mundos *paisano* for a personal loan he would have been turned away whereas other Dos Mundos migrants would not have been. Manuel and a few others also felt that this man, because he held a managerial position, thought he was better than they were. They collectively felt that they were looked down upon for being street vendors. Those people who distanced themselves and failed to make contributions were similarly ostracized by Dos Mundos *paisanos* who did contribute. Not only would they not be asked for help, they would not be invited to events sponsored by the group. When the fruit vendors held a dance in an industrial park near downtown Los Angeles, the invitation to join was not extended to these non-fruit vendors with a history of non-involvement.

### ***Conclusion***

The case of these migrants from Dos Mundos presents an alternative to the literature promoting the benefits of social networks. It also offers an alternative to Doug Massey's theory of cumulative causation of migration (1990). While there is an upward spiral of accumulation that gives migration some forward momentum and benefits some migrants, there is a counterpart downward spiral of loss and backward momentum for other migrants. These Dos Mundos migrants are part of that downward spiral as their lives in the U.S. become characterized by debt,

exploitation, predatory practices and poverty. These upward and downward effects of migration are interrelated, so that while the seven men from Dos Mundos followed here are economic failures, Gabriel, Benjamin, and Yolanda are the beneficiaries of that failure. As with most enterprises, there are some actors that land on top of the pile and other actors who are landed upon.

In a different time period and among different migrants, the realization of exploitation and the development of new leads and contacts would result in the movement into other industries. However, during this period of economic decline and for these fruit vendors, an alternative industry is not an option. And it was uncertain if they would ever get a chance to try their luck within a different occupation given the high incidence of return migration. The Pew Hispanic Center report shows that return migration is occurring on a large scale, the lack of opportunities in the U.S. is impacting many more migrants beyond these Dos Mundos seven. Leaving home for a foreign life abroad is a precarious process. The expansion of programs like Secure Communities and the rising number of deportations contribute to that precariousness. The opportunities for success for migrants like these Dos Mundos seven are few. In the end, very few make it and increasingly the opportunities for the rest are disappearing.

Figure 5. Flyer Advertising Event in Los Angeles to Benefit Dos Mundos

LA COMICION ORGANISADORA DE

Te hase una cordial Invitacion para llebarse acabo una

**QUERMES E RIFA**

El Dia

**17 DE SEPTIEMBRE DEL 2011**

**1 LUGAR: UNA T.V. 46" SONY CLASS**

**2 LUGAR: \$1000 mil Dolares**

**3 LUGAR: UN PLAYSTAION 3**

**EL Grupo: ELEGANCIA MUSICAL**  
acompañado con El Gran  
**DJ AZABACHE**

333 S. Woods Ave  
Los Angeles CA. 90022  
Salida en Atlantic Ave. En easte de Los Angeles

Cell: [Redacted]



**Horarios de Eventos**



Organisados son

**Comida** 1pm a 12am

Los Mejores Tacos Arabes, Posole, Flautas  
Tostadas, Antojitos Mexicanos y Muchas cosas mas

**213 618-0174**

**Diverciones** Para Niños son

Payasos, Caballos (Pony's), Jumpers  
Concursos de Baile



**Rifas** 6pm a 7pm

**1er Lugar: Una T.V. 46" SONY**  
**2nd Lugar: \$1000 (mil Dolares)**  
**3er Lugar: Playstation 3**



## CONCLUSION

One early morning while Manuel and I drove to the wholesale market and following a lull in conversation, Manuel stated, “I want to go back home.” I asked why and he responded with a rhetorical question, “why *stay* here if they don’t *want* me here?” Among the group of fruit vendors that I followed for this research, Manuel’s trajectory was bleak and showed few signs of improvement. In fact, for all of the fruit vendors that I followed, the precariousness of an undocumented status and informal economy job, was, at various points, economically and emotionally taxing. Yet, only three in the group of 28 vendors<sup>36</sup> that I followed had voluntarily chosen to return to their home country (another three had been forcibly deported after being arrested for traffic violations and identified as deportable detainees under S-Comm). Despite the financial hardship and the ever-present fear of crackdowns and arrest, the vendors of this study not only stayed in the country but also stayed on the job. There are some structural explanations for this. As Chapter 4 showed, migrants from Dos Mundos rely on limited information and small social networks that direct them into fruit vending jobs in Los Angeles and, as Chapter 2 explained, once on the job, crackdowns provoke economic loss and mounting debt. Because of this financial insecurity vendors depend on each other and become enmeshed in a network bounded by reciprocal obligations. While hardship is experienced within this group of *fruteros*, the community built around it does offer some limited assistance and relief. The fruit vending job and community of *fruteros* provide just enough opportunity to create promise but not enough promising opportunity. So while Manuel made the comment of feeling unwelcome and wanting

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<sup>36</sup> Seventeen were formally interviewed, five informally interviewed, and I regularly interacted with another six.

to return to Mexico in 2008, he was still in Los Angeles—struggling economically but in the process of certifying his first pushcart—in late August of 2012.

Immigration literature refers to these fruit vendor migrants, who come into the U.S. with clear economic goals and hopes of returning to their home country within a given time period, as “target earners” (Piore 1980). All of the vendors I interviewed had hopes of returning to their home country with sufficient money to start a business, build or fix a home, help parents or spouses, or pay off debts. However, while fruit vendors intend to be target earners and return to their sending community, they instead become trapped in a low-income, high-risk job. Cross-border competing interests then vie for their limited resources, which further weakens their economic positioning in the host country. The literature notes that newly arrived migrants and immigrants tend to send back more remittances than long-term immigrants (Massey 1986; Massey 1987; Yang 2011). However, among *fruteros*, remittances are negatively impacted by both an economic recession and the high-risk, low pay occupation of street vending. Fruit vendors are unlike their newly arrived migrant peers in other occupations who fare better and remit more (Abrego 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009). Because of this hardship, many vendors postpone their return migration and extend their stay in the host country. With time, undocumented migrants slowly develop social, economic, and cultural ties that influence them to stay in the receiving society and make permanent settlement more likely (Chavez 1985; Chavez 1988; Chavez 1991). Douglas Massey wrote, “the propensity to be a sojourner [i.e. temporary migrant] or a settler is not a fixed trait, but a variable that changes over the course of the migrant career” (1985: 671).

Massey noted that the migrant career is continuous but described three major phases within it: the sojourner phase (male migrants without dependents work long hours and have

expectations of returning); transition phase (continuous residence makes sojourner-settler distinction problematic, social ties in U.S. developed and strengthened); and settlement phase (migrants see themselves as residents of host society, well developed contacts in immigrant enclave). This dissertation captures a group of individuals in the sojourner *and* transition phase of their migrant careers. Within this group there are a range of migration types; for example, return migrants (e.g. Cristian, Jesús, Marcos), repeat migrants (e.g. Domingo, Daniel), and sojourner-settlers (e.g. Carmen, Mateo, José, Manuel, Solomon). This dissertation presents the struggles these undocumented migrants encounter in the country and on the job during those early years and in the transitional period when some target earner *migrants*, unable or unwilling to return to their home country, begin to establish roots and become long-term settler *immigrants*. In the following sections, I review the findings of this dissertation and present the theoretical and policy implications of this work.

### ***Summary of Findings***

The main argument of this dissertation is that fruit vendors in Los Angeles lead very precarious lives due to both their undocumented status and their informal work. The prohibition of their presence in the country and as vendors on the street has negatively impacted them. Their lives in the U.S. are structured by limited to no upward mobility; the creation of bounded community and bounded opportunity; the threat and fear of premature voluntary and forced return migration; and strained ties to their sending community. In this section, I summarize the main findings of each empirical chapter.

In Chapter One, “Making the Sale,” I examine how *fruteros* construct the semiotic space that passersby navigate. I focus on four axes that help define that space, these axes include: standardization and recognizability in pushcart presentation, performance of hygiene,

solicitation, and familiarity. The first three axes are dependent on interpretations of external signs, while the fourth axis is cultivated across time through interactions between customers and vendors. Each axis spans a range of meanings and can be interpreted as ideal/appropriate at one end, or as problematic/insufficient at the other. Vendors try to craft an ideal/appropriate semiotic space and passersby assess and scrutinize it when deciding whether to patronize them. The familiarity axis organizes individuals into four categories: passersby, customers, patrons, and connoisseurs. Individuals move from one category into another as they develop a more nuanced perception of the semiotic landscape.

Chapter Two, “Survival, Economic Mobility, and Community,” examines how local repressive policies affect the economic mobility of fruit vendors. In the face of government enforcement, *fruteros* have implemented strategies that allow for short-term survival but fail to bolster long-term upward mobility. The four survival strategies that I analyze include: reliance on kinship and *paisano* networks; street patrols and alerts; geographical positioning and alliance building; and the performance and maintenance of personal, professional and symbolic hygiene. I argue that the limited gains and continuous losses experienced by fruit vendors following health and police department enforcement create a cycle of low income, high debt, and minimal to no mobility. Consequently, fruit vendors have fared much worse than their immigrant informal sector peers (i.e. gardeners, day laborers, and domestic workers). In the end, however, the local regulatory enforcement on fruit vending has not disrupted network-driven migration nor displaced these informal workers because the survival strategies foster a sense of community and reciprocal relationships cemented by financial obligations among the fruit vendors.

Chapter Three, “Informal Agreements: Trust, Control, and Bounded Opportunity,” moves away from the street corner in order to assess how vendors craft informal agreements in their

personal and work lives. These informal agreements allow vendors to exchange goods, services, and currency. I examine two types of agreements: those dealing with securing loans and credit lines and crafting employment arrangements. Within these informal agreements I examine the role of trust networks, social control, and bounded opportunity. For informal agreements dealing with securing loans and credit lines, I show how trust networks and social control function to maintain the flow of economic exchange. For informal agreements dealing with employment arrangements, I show what happens when trust is broken and agreements fail. I use the concept of *resolviendo* to interpret the actions of individuals during this fallout.

Chapter Four, “Migrants of Dos Mundos: Immigrant Outcomes and Sending Community” examines the far-reaching influence of a sending community. I focus on two aspects of the sending community of Dos Mundos in the Mexican state of Puebla. First, I show that the hometown some vendors come from has a strong cross-border influence that guides them into certain cities and occupations. This helps to explain why these migrants enter into and remain in the informal and high-risk fruit vending business. Next, I focus on the cross-border competing interests that vie for migrants’ limited social and economic attention. I classify these competing interests into three general types: Cost of living obligations vs. Family obligations; U.S. families vs. Mexico families; and, Private sphere expenditures vs. Public sphere expenditures. The sending community of Dos Mundos structures entry into the U.S. and limits work options while also stretching the financial resources of its U.S.-based migrants.

***Theoretical Implications: Vulnerability, Recessions, and Migrant Entrepreneurs***

My research speaks to the theoretical question of how undocumented migrants maneuver through a precarious life in the U.S. More generally, this dissertation is about vulnerability and how vulnerability is created, structured, and reproduced during the sojourner and transition phase



of one group's migrant career. Leo Chavez has written extensively about the experiences of undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans in the U.S. and their sojourner-settler transitional period (Chavez 1988; Chavez 1990; Chavez 1991; Chavez 1992; Chavez 1994). Chavez writes that those undocumented migrants who intend to stay as long-term settlers "imagine themselves to be part of the community" but remain outsiders in the eyes of the larger society (1991: 257). These migrants thus become marginal members of society who continuously seek to end their liminal status. Chavez notes that the settlement process has "countervailing, often contradictory, influences that both facilitate and inhibit the incorporation of undocumented immigrants into U.S. society" (Chavez 1991: 258). Such is the case with the fruit vendors of this study; their vulnerability severely impacts livelihoods but does not break spirits.

Within the fruit vending occupation, the ease of entry, social networks, and promise of opportunity lures workers into the profession. The work is not too difficult and the pay is, at times, better than what minimum wage workers receive. However, crackdowns are always a threat and while vendors may receive favorable profit margins one week, financial calamity might befall them the next. There are some who fare well but they often exploit other vendors to get ahead. For most *fruteros*, upward mobility in this business is not guaranteed. After a short period, vendors invest just enough resources and strengthen social networks that make leaving the occupation difficult. Vendors become trapped by the economic and social investments they make and by the limited opportunities that exist elsewhere. Following crackdowns, mounting debt and reciprocal obligations to members of their social network also trap vendors. Within this occupation, when things go badly they can very quickly lead to financial devastation which further binds vendors to the job. This dissertation shows how this vulnerability is created through local ordinances that ban street vending, health and police department enforcement of those

ordinances, informality in economic exchanges, bounded kinship and *paisano* networks, and cross-border competing interests.

Another important question this dissertation addresses is how undocumented migrants and their families in sending communities fare during an economic recession. There are other cases in history of migrant populations being affected by recessions in the host country; in most instances, authorities in host countries believed incorrectly that recessions would cause migrants to stay at home or to return to their home countries (Bohning 1981; Constant and Massey 2002; Martin and Miller 1980). Likewise, among fruit vendors in Los Angeles, the economic recession in the U.S. did not provoke a large wave of return migration. Instead, these migrants hunkered down to weather the storm. The recession affected their livelihoods in the U.S. and limited the amount of money they were able to remit. This pattern of declining remittances was observed on a national level as well. Following the economic downturn in the United States, scholars began documenting both the decline in remittances to Latin America (Lazo 2008) and the declining value of the dollar (Wilson 2009). As Wilson noted, the Inter-American Development Bank predicted that in 2008 remittances to Latin American would fall by 1.7 percent (equivalent to \$150 billion USD). The families of fruit vendors in Mexico noted the decreasing remittances and blamed not only the recession but also the high-risk work of vending. In my dissertation I focused on the community of Dos Mundos in Puebla and noted how cross-border obligations strained the financial resources of vendors. In some instances, vendors opted to remit less and, as a result, also limited their social contact with home due to feelings of shame and embarrassment.

Finally, this dissertation addresses the question of how undocumented migrant entrepreneurs fare in less than hospitable host countries. The literature on immigrant entrepreneurship has been largely positive but it has also focused on immigrants with particular

attributes that contributed to their success, namely: a documented status, start-up capital, high levels of education, relevant skill set, work within the formal economy, and government support (e.g. minority business loans) (Bates 1997; Borjas 1990; Light and Gold 2000; Light and Roach 1996). These characteristics have contributed to their success and upward mobility in the host country. Unlike their peers in the immigrant entrepreneur literature, fruit vendors lack many of these positive characteristics. They are undocumented migrants, with very little capital, limited educational backgrounds, and, due to their young age, very limited work-related skills. These characteristics combine with an informal sector occupation and prohibitive vending policies to create a less than successful entrepreneurial venture. The combined effects of these characteristics make fruit vendors an exception in a literature that lauds the entrepreneurial spirit of immigrants.

### ***Policy Implications***

Fruit vendors in Los Angeles lie at the intersection of several issues dealing with immigration policy, public space use policy, and public health policy. This small group of undocumented migrants is unlikely to impact immigration policy at the national level; particularly in the way other groups, such as Dream Activists, have affected immigration policy. However, immigration policy both at the national and local level greatly impacts *fruteros*. For example, the introduction of Secure Communities resulted in the deportation of three vendors in this study. Even local ordinances that initially have nothing to do with immigration policy can have a great impact on undocumented migrants. As Light (2006) noted, local political intolerance of immigrant poverty led to the creation and enforcement of county ordinances that targeted this population. At a local level, the outcomes of this group of street vendors might help to inform and modify county ordinances, health department policies, and public space use

policies. In this section, I analyze how local public health policies and regulations might be modified to improve both the policing of street vendors and the greater certification of their numbers.

Prohibitively expensive fees and difficult to maneuver bureaucratic policies prevent many fruit vendors from seeking certification from the health department. It is important for the health department to regulate fruit vendors in an effort to prevent food-borne illness, however, their policy of cracking down on vendors and confiscating goods and pushcarts does little to deter vendors in the long run. While it could be said that the fees and policies help to limit the number of street vendors operating on the streets of Los Angeles, they also serve to push these populations further underground. This can create more harm for the general public health than good. The urban sprawl of Los Angeles County and the limited resources of the Public Health Department work against that department's goal of curtailing illegal street vending. It is unlikely that the County and City government will allocate sufficient funds to the health department for them to fully crackdown and stop illegal vending altogether. And while these crackdowns can be financially and emotionally devastating, this calamity is also routinized and, to a certain degree, anticipated. The goal of the health department should not be to crackdown on these vendors and steal their livelihoods in an effort to safeguard public health, but to find a way to move vendors closer to a regulated status where operating practices can be supervised and corrected.

Just as the health department cannot completely eradicate the "problem" presented by large numbers of unregulated street vendors, the public's desire and willingness to purchase products offered by street vendors will not diminish. So long as there is a market for their products, fruit vendors will operate in the shadows of the informal economy. For this reason too, the health department should look for some type of certification and regulation to keep fruit

vendors from moving farther into the shadows and away from safe and sanitary operating procedures. A health department that educates and facilitates regulation is more likely to decrease the chances of a public health crisis than a health department that conducts crackdowns and drives vendors into hiding.

## APPENDIX A: CERTIFYING A PUSHCART

The permitting process for a Mobile Food Facility<sup>37</sup> in Los Angeles County<sup>38</sup> is lengthy and expensive. Here I outline the entire process to show the requirements and standards that must be met in order to certify a pushcart. I identify the ways in which these requirements can limit pushcart owners (i.e. vendors), many of whom are undocumented, from certifying the pushcarts they use.

The process of certification begins when a pushcart owner submits an application, along with two sets of pushcart blueprints, and pays the Vehicle Inspection Program (VIP) fee of \$649.00 (as of July 2012). The blueprints, or plan check, are plans that provide a top view of the cart, operator's side view, and a plumbing system schema. As stated previously, a pushcart with the proper drainage system will cost about \$2,000.00. The blueprints for pushcarts can cost up to \$350.00 and are usually made by the same company that manufactured the pushcart. If a pushcart has been bought used, the owner must find an independent company or individual to create the blueprint plans. The application must include the business name, owner's name, and owner's contact information. Pushcart owners who are undocumented must seek out friends or family with U.S. citizenship to provide this information on their applications. In signing this form, the owner (or proxy owner with citizenship) acknowledges that they or their employees have adequate knowledge of food safety standards.

Because pushcart operators do not have access to running water or restroom facilities, fruit vendors are only allowed to sell prepackaged fruit in plastic containers with no fruits from

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<sup>37</sup> A Mobile Food Facility is defined as “any vehicle used in conjunction with a commissary or other permanent food facility upon which food is sold or distributed at retail” (County of Los Angeles Public Health Department, Plan Check Guidelines). Fruit vending pushcarts are considered Mobile Food Facilities under these guidelines.

<sup>38</sup> In all cities except Long Beach, Pasadena, and Vernon which each have their own independent health department.

the melon family (e.g. watermelon, cantaloupe, honeydew melons). Prepackaged containers must be stored at 40 degrees Fahrenheit. The application that owners sign and submit to begin the certification process must have owners acknowledge that only prepackaged food will be served. That requirement is part of the mobile food facility business classification. Prepackaged fruit containers must be prepared in the certified commissary where the pushcart is stored. The County of Los Angeles Public Health Department provides a list of commercial commissaries that includes sixteen facilities throughout the area (Los Angeles, Valencia, City of Commerce, Van Nuys, Canyon Country, Northridge, and South Gate). After the application and blueprints are submitted and the fee paid, owners must wait twenty working days for the plans to be reviewed and approved. The fee entitles owners to a maximum of two plan reviews with a charge of \$43.00 per hour for all subsequent plan reviews.

Once the application and blueprints have been reviewed, the Public Health Department contacts the owner to set up a field inspection of the Mobile Food Facility. Owners are entitled to two field inspections with a charge of \$43.00 per hour for all subsequent field inspections. During the field inspection, health inspectors examine pushcarts to ensure that equipment layout, plumbing layout, insignia, surfaces, materials, compartments, enclosures, counter spaces, and storage spaces meet the minimum requirements required. If pushcarts pass this inspection, owners must submit several other documents, these include: a commissary parking agreement, restroom agreement, mobile food facility route sheet, menu item and operation form, and a vending notice form.

The commissary parking agreement must include the owner's name, contact information, driver's license number, health license number, and parking space number. The restroom agreement provides proof that an area business, within 200 feet of the mobile food facility, is

willing to grant vendors access to toilet facilities that meet all the criteria described in the California Retail Food Code. In the absence of a restroom agreement, the mobile food facility must move from the location every hour. The restroom agreement must include the business name, business contact information, and business owner's permission to use said facilities. A mobile food facility route sheet shows the address where a vendor will be stationed as well as the time in and out of that location. A menu item and operation form describes what items will be offered, how they will be displayed and dispensed, and how surfaces will be cleaned and kept sanitary (including the water to disinfectant ratio). Two samples of packaging with labels must be submitted. Labels must include the business name, business contact information, ingredients, date packaged, and net weight of the product. Finally, a vending notice form citing the Los Angeles County Code Section 7.62.020 and 7.62.030 as well as the City of Los Angeles Municipal Code section 42.00 must be signed and dated by the owner.<sup>39</sup> After all of these forms are submitted and approved, the owner receives a decal, which should be displayed prominently on the pushcart, denoting its certification. Pushcarts must always display Public Health Permit, certification decal, business name or the name of the operator, city, state, zip code, and name of permittee in letters at least three inches high.

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<sup>39</sup> LA County Code, Section 7.62.020 prohibits vending food from commercial vehicles or pushcarts without a valid County Business License. LA County Code, Section 7.62.030 prohibits all vending from public sidewalks and allows vending on the public highways only from a motor vehicle. All pushcarts or non-motorized vehicles are prohibited from vending upon any public thoroughfare. The City of Los Angeles Municipal Code, Section 42.00 prohibits all vending from the public sidewalks.



## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Biographical Profile

1. Where is your family from?
  - a. What region in that place?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Do you live here with family or friends?
  - a. If so, with whom?
4. Do you have family living anywhere else in or outside of the United States?
5. Where do your parents live?
6. How many siblings do you have?
  - a. Do they live in the U.S?
  - b. What kind of work do they do?
7. What level of education do your parents have?
8. What level of education do you have?
9. Have you lived anywhere else in the US?
  - a. What did you do when you lived in those places?
  - b. How long did you live there?

### Street Vending

10. What does a typical day as a vendor look like?
  11. How long have you been a street vendor?
  12. How old were you when you started working as a vendor?
  13. How did you first begin working as a vendor?
    - a. What other jobs did you have before being a street vendor?
  14. How many other people do you work with?
    - a. Where are they from?
    - b. Are they mostly men or women?
  15. Do you own your own cart?
    - a. If not, whom do you rent it from? For how much?
  16. How many days a week do you work?
  17. How much do you make a day, a week?
    - a. What are your expenses/fees?
    - b. How much do you spend on fruit? Today? Yesterday?
  18. What are the major problems you face as a street vendor?
  19. How do you deal with these problems?
  20. What part of town do you usually work in?
    - a. Have you worked in different parts of town?
    - b. How often do you change location?
  21. Describe your customers in your present location.
  22. Do you store your cart in a bodega or somewhere else?
    - a. If in a bodega, how much do you pay?
    - b. What are the conditions like in the bodega where you store your cart?
    - c. Do you have any kind of permit from that bodega?
  23. In terms of your occupation, where do you see yourself in 5 years? In 10 years?
- ### Municipal Regulations

24. What have been your experiences with the authorities here, both inside and outside of your occupation as a street vendor?
  - a. Has your cart ever been confiscated?
  - b. Have you ever been arrested as a vendor?
25. Are you familiar with the health department procedures?
26. How did you learn about the health department and their various regulations?

#### Economic Resources

27. Who do you support financially?
  - a. Does someone support you?
28. Who do you share financial responsibilities with?
29. Are you expected to contribute to household expenses?
  - a. What proportion?
  - b. Why or why not?
30. What are your monthly expenses? (rent, groceries, etc)
31. Do you earn enough for these expenses?
  - a. If not, do you supplement your income?
  - b. How?

#### Immigration

32. When and how did you come into the country?
  - a. Did you come alone or with others? Are they relatives?
33. Are you here legally?
34. Do you travel to your home country?
  - a. If so, how often do you return?
35. How much does that trip cost?
36. Do you want to return or do you want to live here permanently?
37. Would you stay if you could do so legally?

#### Other

38. What else do you think is important about you that I should know?
39. Do you have questions for me?

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