The Fayuca Hormiga of Used Clothing and the Fabric of the Mexico-U.S. Border

Mélissa Gauthier

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ABSTRACT

The Fayuca Hormiga of Used Clothing and the Fabric of the Mexico-U.S. Border

Mélissa Gauthier, PhD.
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This thesis investigates the border's economic underworld. It details the lives of ordinary people who live along state borders. With particular reference to the border between Mexico and the United States, this thesis explores how cross-border small-scale traders experience the nation and the state in their everyday economic activities at international borders. Along the Mexico-U.S. border, there is a lively trade of American second-hand clothing introduced clandestinely into Mexico where its import for resale is prohibited. Second-hand clothing is retailed in stores and warehouses along the American side of the border and brought into Mexico through an impressive system of smuggling from the United States called *fayuca hormiga*. This thesis is an ethnographic study of used clothing *fayuqueros* or "ant traders" in the Mexico/United States borderland whose livelihoods depend upon crossing state lines and exploiting differential economic opportunities on either side. This anthropological research investigates how small-scale cross-border traders involved in the illicit flow of second-hand clothing across the

Mexico-United States border interact with the structures of state power. By documenting the history, trading culture, and contemporary refashioning of secondhand clothing in the Mexico-United States borderlands, this thesis sheds light on the various processes of appropriation, transformation and redefinition that second-hand clothes undergo by crossing borders. This thesis shows how the border plays a part in the economic processes through which the value of used clothing emerges and how the unruly flow of these material goods shapes the social "fabric" of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Borders, regardless of their location, represent lucrative zones of exchange and trade, often illicit and clandestine. Illicit movement of people and commodities across national borders takes place worldwide on a daily basis. This thesis investigates the border's economic underworld. It details the lives of ordinary people who live along state borders. With particular reference to the border between Mexico and the United States, this thesis investigates how cross-border small-scale traders experience the nation and the state in their everyday economic activities at international borders.

The border between Mexico and the United States U.S. border is a classic setting for smuggling (Heyman 1994a:54). Much has been written about the traffic in illegal drugs and undocumented migrants from Mexico to the United States. This thesis deals

with the other way around: the traffic in contraband merchandise from the United States to Mexico. A wide range of prohibited items from the United States is smuggled into Mexico. Guns are restricted in Mexico, and thus they are smuggled from the United States. American alcoholic products and even frozen chicken are highly prized by the *fayuqueros*. Second-hand clothing from the United States is the most popular item smuggled into Mexico where its import for resale is prohibited (O'Day and López 2001:35).

Second-hand clothing is retailed in stores and warehouses along the American side of the border and brought into Mexico through an impressive system of smuggling from the United States called *fayuca*, requiring the bribery of Mexican customs officers. Participants in *fayuca* are called *fayuqueros* (cross-border traders) and include professional traders, middle-and upper class visitors to the United States, and returning migrant workers and families.

This thesis is an ethnographic study of used clothing *fayuqueros* or "ant traders" in the Mexico/United States borderland whose livelihoods depend upon crossing state lines and exploiting differential economic opportunities on either side. The research question investigated in the course of this research has been shaped and stimulated by analytical perspectives and empirical researches on the movement of commodities across borders, secondhand clothing, "the criminal life of things" and the phenomenon of cross-border small-scale trading which are presented in the following literature review.

Using my cross-border trade study between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez as a contextual background, this chapter also deals with methodology for researching informal and illegal smuggling economies at borders. I describe how I have managed to do

ethnographic research on the "*fayuca*" trade which is carried out in a border environment of uncertainty, illegality, and corruption. I relate my own ethnographic journey into the U.S.-Mexico border's economic underworld, a journey punctuated by constraints, faux pas, unanticipated difficulties, problems and anxieties associated with participant observations as well as a great deal of serendipity. I also discuss some difficulties I have experienced in the course of my fieldwork in Ciudad Juárez considering the climate of extreme violence against women that dominates the city and my attempts at overcoming them. Finally, the last pages of this chapter present a detailed outline of the thesis.

Commodities and Value in motion

The work of anthropologists who have tracked globalization through the circulation of commodities across national and cultural boundaries is an important theoretical component of this research. Anthropological efforts to track commodities and follow objects in motion grew out of a rebirth of material culture studies during the 1980s that drew new attention to contexts and practices of consumption (Miller 1995). Drawing upon Appadurai and Kopytoff's (1986) rich notion of "commodity biographies", researchers have followed the movement of everyday things across different contexts and phases of circulation. This "follow-the-thing" method has allowed them "to trace the social relations and material linkages that this movement creates and within which the value of commodities emerges" (Foster 2006: 285; see also Haugerud, Stone and Peters 2000; Walsh and Ferry 2003;). Nowadays, "anthropologists are deliberately applying a "follow the thing" method to an ever-widening range of commodities" (Foster 2006:292) – from broccoli (Fisher and Benson 2006) to shea butter (Chalfin 2004) and secondhand clothing (Hansen 2002).

Ferry (2005) analyzes the extraction, circulation, and use of mineral specimens from Guanajuato, Mexico. In examining aspects of value making with respect to these stones, Ferry (2005:420) "brings together Nancy Munn's (1977) notion of value as a set of material–symbolic transformations with a multisited methodology made famous by Sidney Mintz's (1985) treatment of world sugar production and consumption and used in a number of recent ''follow-the-object'' or ''commodity-chain'' studies". She argues that looking at ''value transformations'' and the actions that bring them about can enhance our understanding of "multiple, overlapping, and interdependent forms of value" (Ferry 2005:421).

My research is grounded in recent reinterpretations of "commodity chains" as "circuits of culture" which have emerged within geography and anthropology "for studying how the movement of commodities often entails shifts in use value, that is, shifts in what commodities mean to users (including producers) situated at different nodes on a commodity network" (Foster 2006:289). This new wave of works organized around commodities stimulates and shapes the research question articulated in this thesis.

The traditional commodity chain approach draws upon world system theory (Wallerstein) and has been adapted by Gereffi to become a framework within which to view commodity relationships. These analyses focused on "commodity chains", defined as "the global sequences by which raw materials, production processes, and final consumers are linked" (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994). Although the commodity chain approach has proven useful for elucidating the ways in which aspects of commodity exchange are distributed across long distances and among localities with very different

geopolitical positions, it has been criticized lately for treating "production as the privileged moment or phase in the story of a commodity" (Foster 2006:289).

The "circuit of culture" approach is grounded in ethnographic practice and pays closer attention to culture and the meanings that people attribute to things. As Foster (2006) indicates, this approach differs from commodity chain analysis in three related ways. First, it traces the articulation of several different processes instead of seeing production as the privileged moment or phase in the story of a commodity. "Consumption, in other words, is neither a terminal nor passive activity, but is itself a source and site of value creation. In this sense, the "circuits of culture" approach adopts a view of consumer agency characteristic of polemics in material culture studies that put consumption in "the vanguard of history"" (Foster 2006:289, Miller 1995).

"Second, as the metaphor of a circuit implies, the movement of commodities is treated as reversible and nonlinear, without beginning or end. The circuit moreover, is not a simple loop, but rather a set of linkages, between two or more processes that is not determined or fixed" (Foster 2006:289). Finally, while the commodity chain approach is not entirely indifferent to the place of consumption ("consumer demand") in a commodity chain, "the circuit of culture approach shows decisively how consumption matters (Foster 2006:290). It puts consumption in the spotlight as an important activity through which people negotiate and renegotiate the meaning – or qualitative value – of things.

A burgeoning literature on cross-cultural consumption has shown how the value and meanings of consumer goods are transformed by crossing borders (see, for example, the essays in Howes 1996). The major contribution of this body of work has been to shed

light on the agency of consumers often represented as passive recipients of foreign imports and their active participation in the materialization of new form of cultural heterogeneity.

Secondhand clothing

The international second-hand clothing trade has a long history, yet it is only very recently that this topic has become the focus of substantive work in anthropology and other disciplines (Palmer and Clark 2005, Kuechler and Miller 2005, Hansen 2004). This growing interest for second-hand clothing represents one of the more productive outcome of the extensive work in material culture and the 'biographies of things' that has informed and transformed our understanding of the value of commodities from a cultural perspective (Appadurai 1986).

Kopytoff's (1986) 'cultural biography of the object' has become a standard academic text in consumption studies and material culture studies that serves to inform our understanding of second-hand clothing from historical, cross-cultural as well as social and economic dimensions (Palmer and Clark 2005:2). The contribution of this new body of work lies in its analysis of the complex routes through which second-hand clothing travel and ways through which new meanings are inscribed as part of the second life of clothes (Palmer and Clark 2005:99). As such it works as a creative unpacking of an extended biography of things. Although not new, this commodity chain has expended rapidly over the past two decades (Schneider 2002).

Many anthropologists interested in dress have discussed the role of imported second-hand clothing. Tracy Bachrach Ehlers (2000), a cultural anthropologist working in Guatemala since the 1970s, gives a detailed description of the secondhand clothing

industry or *Pacas* in San Pedro and its impact on women's participation in commerce and dress. Elayne Zorn (2005), a cultural anthropologist currently working in the Andes, describes how second-hand garments are among the many styles of ethnic cross-dressing exhibited by the Sakaka of Highland Bolivia.

While many anthropologists have mentioned the recent expansion of second-hand clothing markets, Karen Hansen was the first to conduct an in-depth study on the larger context of its sourcing, distribution and consumption on a global scale. Hansen's remarkable study of the secondhand clothing business and the local dress practices this consumption has given rise to in Zambia has opened up new research angles, inspiring recent work in India (Norris 2005) and ongoing research in the Philippines (Milgram 2004), among others countries.

Hansen (2002) explores the world of secondhand clothing as a system of provision, that is, a "comprehensive chain of activities between the two extremes of production and consumption, each link of which plays a potentially significant role in the social construction of the commodity both in its material and cultural aspects" (Fine and Leopold 1993:33). Hansen's important work on the current global trade in second-hand clothing and its application to Zambia has largely been concerned with questioning widespread perceptions in the media of the negative effects of the so-called 'dumping' of secondhand clothing upon developing economies. By emphasizing the cultural construction of demand at the local level, Hansen has analysed the life-cycles of discarded clothing exported to Zambia and turned into Salaula, a fashionable resource.

Lucy Norris's work (2005) on clothing recycling in India shifts the research emphasis on clothing from consumption to the materiality of cloth as a strategic resource

for the unmaking and remaking of persons and identities. Unlike Zambia, India prohibits the import of secondhand clothing. However, it allows the import of woollen fibers among which are 'mutilated hosiery', a trade term for wool garments shredded by machines in the West prior to export. Tracing the flow between India and the West, Norris examines the import of 'multilated' fabrics; "their sorting into color ranges; their shredding, carding, spinning; and their reappearance as threads used for blankets, knitting yarn, and wool fabrics for local consumption and export" (Hansen 2004:386).

Extending this inquiry to the Philippine context, Lynne Milgram (2004) shows how Cordillera women, as traders and consumers, recontextualize imported second-hand clothing with regard to local custom. Although, in theory, the importation of secondhand clothing for resale is illegal in the Philippines, in practice, the parameters of this trade that currently employs a large number of men and women are continuously negotiated and debated throughout the country. A small group of Philippine traders has built a transnational connection with Hong Kong suppliers in order to gain more control of this trade.

Milgram (2004:196) explains how "these traders would travel to Hong Kong every four to six weeks to choose, sort, pack and ship the garments back to the Philippines" in individually addressed boxes known as *balikbayan* (a term used for returning Overseas Filipino Workers), of standard size for airline check-in, each of which contains the duty-free allowance of personal goods contract workers may bring with them on their return. The character of this development in the secondhand clothing trade is part of Milgram's current research project. She is looking at the new channels of collection and distribution within Hong Kong and between Hong Kong and the Philippines,

particularly, and Southeast Asia more generally.

Many countries forbid the import of second-hand clothing, while others restrict the volume or limit it to charitable purposes rather than resale. Imports prohibitions on second-hand clothing in Mexico and Latin America will be discussed further in the next chapter. As Hansen (2004:5) correctly pointed out, "Regardless of import rules, and because borders are porous, smuggling and other illegal practices accompany the trade".

Illicit flows and criminal things

The theoretical framework of this research also brings into play the study of "illegal flows" – flows of commodities, persons, and ideas that have been outlawed by one or more states. Borders are the classic sites of research into unauthorized flows because flows are more visible there than in any other observation sites (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005:47). According to Fadahunsi & Rosa (2002:398) illegal trade can take three basic forms: (1) trading in goods and services that are normally forbidden by law (for example, narcotic drugs, prostitution, stolen vehicles and illegal firearms); (2), trading in legal goods and services in an illegal way by avoiding duties and taxes; and (3), using illegal, unfair practices to attain an unfair advantage (for example, insider trading and black market currency exchange).

An interesting theoretical perspective contributing to the problematization of this research is that proposed by Van Schendel and Abraham in the introduction to their edited book on illicit flows and criminal things, in which they call for a radically different way of conceptualizing illegal transnational flows. Van Schendel and Abraham (2005:15) defined "transnational criminal activities" as "forms of social practice that intersect two or more regulatory spaces and violate at least one normative or legal rule".

Regulatory spaces refer to zones within which particular sets of rules prevail, rules that may be generated by states or otherwise socially produced and that are usually formulated directly in response to specific practices, typically some combination of the consumption, production, exchange, or distribution of commodities. Van Schendel and Abraham refer to the notion of the "life cycle" of the commodity, which can be outlined through a sequence of linked activities that are exemplified by the image of the commodity chain. They also criticize the traditional commodity chain approach for not taking into consideration consumption a vital omission in the case of the transnational illicit.

> While in general the movement of any capitalist commodity continues until the moment of exhaustion, in the case of illicit goods, movement/consumption might also mean crossing over a key regulatory threshold. The vector of consumption, the passage of the commodities from one agent to another, is also often an act of *transformation* as well as an act of exchange. (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005, 15)

In other words, according to Van Schendel and Abraham, consumption cannot be detached from exchange and transformation, and movement constitutes an inherent quality of commodity chains. Production, movement, and consumption, they argue, are bound by and happen within regulatory spaces. Each transformation carries with it new meanings, which might translate the illegal good into something quite legal, or vice versa. Studying illegal flows at borders from this kind of theoretical perspective can shed light on the everyday practices (production, exchange, consumption, and distribution) and social networks that actually make it possible for "illegal" commodities to cross

regulatory spaces. "What determines legality and illegality at different points of the commodity chain is the particular regulatory scale the object finds itself in" (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005:17). Thus, the origins of regulatory authority must be identified, whether they are political (legal and illegal) or social (licit and illicit).

These authors propose a more subtle approach to the issues of legality and illegality, one that draws upon a conceptual distinction between what states consider to be legitimate ("legal") and what people involved in transnational networks consider to be legitimate ("licit"). As Van Schendel and Abraham (2005:4) mention, "Many transnational movements of people, commodities, and ideas are illegal because they defy the norms and rules of formal political authority but they are quite acceptable, 'licit,' in the eyes of participants in these transactions and flows'. As Josiah Heyman and Alan Smart (1999) wrote in the introduction to an influential book on states and illegal practices, "Many illegal-labelled activities have much legitimate life in society (or in particular groups), and under such circumstances the state response can constitute bad law, adding to illegality and persecution" (1999:21).

By introducing the concept of social legitimacy (or licitness) and setting it against political legitimacy (or legality), Van Schendel and Abraham are encouraging us to adopt analytic perspectives that privilege the participants in international illicit activities, which, they argue, allows for the development of contrasting explanations and understandings of the causes, meanings, and processes involved in what they call "the criminal life of things" (2005:6). As Donnan and Wilson also suggest, to refer to clandestine transborder trade as "smuggling" risks adopting a statist perspective which may be at odds with the self-perceptions of those most closely involved, who often see

their own activities as entirely legitimate (see Flynn 1997:324). This research is an ethnographic study of cross-border small-scale trading in the Mexico/United States borderland mobilizing an analytic framework that put emphasis on the cross-border traders' point of view.

Cross-border small-scale trading

The idea that international borders generate economic opportunities to be exploited by those who are able to cross them on a regular basis, and to take advantage of differences in the supply, demand and costs of various goods and services available on either side of the border, is a basic tenet of border studies (Flynn 1997, Donnan and Wilson 1999, Holtom 2003). A common use of the border as an economic resource is apparent in cross-border small-scale trading.

Small-scale trading across international borders has developed into a mass phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe since the beginning of the 1990s (Egbert 2006:347). The practice of small-scale trading has been acknowledged by a number of researchers as a strategy employed by inhabitants of Europe's post-socialist space as a means of cushioning the shocks of economic transition. It is worth mentioning that the mass phenomenon of cross-border small-scale trading was first observed, mentioned and analyzed by anthropologists.

In anthropological research the topic of cross-border small-scale trading in Eastern Europe is brought up by Hann and Hann (1992) in a study on northern Turkey where they examine traders from the former USSR on open-air markets. Hann and Hann call this phenomenon "trader tourism", a term indicating that these people cross borders pretending to be tourists while their purpose for traveling is trade. Further research exists

for other countries of Eastern Europe. Holtom (2003) elaborated on the cross-border trade between Kaliningrad and Lithuania. Egbert (2006) analyses cross-border small-scale trading at the Bulgarian-Turkish border from the perspective of New Institutional Economics.

The practice of small-scale cross-border trading has also been studied in Africa. Flynn (1997) shows how residents at the Bénin-Nigeria border have relied on transborder trade as a source of income and how they have subsequently forged a strong sense of "border identity". Fadahunsi and Rosa (2002) focus on the Nigerian cross-border trade. In a rich ethnography of life in the Mozambique/South African Borderlands, Kloppers (2004) investigates the cross-border smuggling of weapons, drugs and stolen vehicles. Another illegal article that is smuggled across the international border is second-hand clothes. Although clothes are not "dangerous" articles like weapons and drugs, it is illegal to trade in second-hand clothes in South Africa where the smuggling of second-hand clothes across the border is taken very seriously by the South African Police (Kloppers 2004:152). Kloppers (2004:146) briefly describes how the business of smuggling second-hand clothes from Mozambique to South Africa works. This is not a unique phenomenon in Southern Africa. Secondhand clothing is exchanged widely across Zambia's borders to neighboring countries like Zimbabwe that ban this import (Hansen 2000:152).

Around all Mexico's border-crossing points, there is a lively *ropa usada* trade which operates outside the law. This specific form of cross-border small-scale trading is often described with the expression *fayuca hormiga.* According to Pelayo and Para (1994:7), the term *fayuca* is a popular expression used along the northern Mexican border to designate the introduction of new and used merchandise for consumption: its objective

is small-scale commercialization at the retail level, as a source of supply for local consumption and as a complement to national production. "The evocative Spanish expression "*hormiga*" (on a small scale, literally antlike) signifies the energetic, industrious habits" (Campbell 2005) of these networks of cross-border traders who bring in secretly and clandestinely there used clothing imports into Mexico.

The *fayuca hormiga* is a typical phenomenon of international borders like "ant trade". Cichocki *et al.* (2001:56) define "ant trade" as "the phenomenon of repeated carrying of relatively small amounts of goods by the same persons in order to sell them at a profit on the other side of the border". As Grimson (2002:154) suggests, "in every border region there are people who make a living out of taking merchandise across the border while avoiding customs. They live off crossing the border". On some borders (such as the Argentinian-Paraguayan and the Argentinian-Bolivian) this activity is performed by women known as *paseras*, (literally 'ferrywomen'). In Uruguaiana-Paso de los Libres such men and women are known as *pasadores* ('couriers'). Other terms referring to people engaged in similar activities across international borders are "tourist traders" (Hann and Hann 1992) "shuttle traders" (Yükseker 2004, Holtom 2003), "suitcase traders" (Freeman 2001), "cross-border petty traders" and "baggers" (Ribeiro 2006).

On one hand, people who make money from the subversive economy of the international border are directly dependent on the very existence of the international border. On the other hand, they constantly fight against the very thing that ensures their livelihoods (Kloppers 2004:142). For these people the international border is at the same time a basis for and a threat to their working lives (Grimson: 2002).

This thesis investigates how small-scale cross-border traders involved in the illicit flow of second-hand clothing across the Mexico-United States border interact with the structures of state power. The question I ask is "How does the border act as an obstacle and/or a creator of economic opportunities for "ant traders" involved in the *fayuca* trade of used clothing between the United States and Mexico? This thesis explores the different ways in which the trade environment in the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez border region stifles or promotes informal cross border trade. It explores how the economic activities of Mexican *fayuqueros* "challenge state attempts to regulate the movement and flow of commodities, to define what are and what are not marketable goods" (Donnan and Wilson 1999:88).

Research Methodology

Research on illegal smuggling economies at international borders like this one unsurprisingly elicits some methodological and ethical dilemmas. The research atmosphere was often filled with fear and suspicion, and it has been a challenging environment in which to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. The following account of my ethnographic encounter with the El Paso/Juarez region is for the purpose of providing some insights into the difficulties I have experienced in conducting this sort of research in the context of this specific border and the tactics I have put into practice to overcome them.

The nature of my research led me to adopt an intensive and less structured ethnographic approach centered almost exclusively on participant observation. In this specific cross-border trade study, it was the watching, listening, asking and participating with cross-border traders that facilitated my entry into the traders' symbolic life-world which in turn allowed an understanding of their economic activities in a way that would

not have been possible with conventional questionnaire and interview methods (Fadahunsi 2000).

The advantage of the ethnographic research approach lies in its primary concern with establishing trust and rapport between researcher and researched, which is crucial to gaining access to cross-border informal economies. The ethnographic study of "illicit" activities depends to a large extent on the establishment of trust between the researcher and the researched and the ethnographer's presence in this context is always susceptible of arousing people suspicion. Given the atmosphere of fear and mistrust that often accompanies border communities experiencing uncertainty, illegality, and corruption, being an outsider was a disadvantage overcome only by a long-term stay in the community, a tested anthropological fieldwork method.

Initially, I was a very suspicious character, not only as an outsider but as someone hanging around, asking questions and taking pictures. On a couple occasions I faced joking accusations of being a spy sent by the Mexican government to find out the names of the dealers who were passing large amounts of clothes over the border. I denied these light-hearted accusations but also realized that I would have to invest a significant amount of time in gaining the trust of informants and making my research transparent.

At some point, there was a *chisme (*gossip) circulating that I was there when two persons were arrested on their way back from El Paso for trying to smuggle in used clothing at a Mexican port of entry. Fortunately, most of my informants did not believe the gossip that they regularly heard about me and some of them even stood up for me in some occasions. The most interesting thing about this kind of incident from an ethnographic or methodological point of view is that it became clear to me as my

fieldwork progressed that no ethnographer can really be completely above suspicion when researching the border's economic underworld.

Ethnographic Field Research

I conducted ethnographic field research for 12 months in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. During this period my husband, Jean-Sébastien, and I resided in Ciudad Juárez. I became acquainted with El Paso and Ciudad Juarez during the summer of 2003 conducting preliminary fieldwork on the used clothing cross-border trade. Afterwards, I returned to Ciudad Juárez from January to September, 2005, to extend my ethnographic research on the wholesaling, smuggling and marketing angles of this cross-border trade.

My choice of Ciudad Juárez as a field site was fortuitous. I had just completed my first year of doctoral studies at Concordia University and was working as an assistant in a research programme on recycling and the "second life" of things. I was doing exploratory research on related issues and Mexico where I had already done fieldwork for my master degree in anthropology. This is how I found an intriguing newspaper article appeared in the *El Paso Times* about the booming trade in used clothing between the United Sates and Mexico.

I worked on the formulation of a research proposal and made some inquiries to assess the feasibility of my project among some contacts I had at the University of Texas at El Paso. I submitted a summary protocol form and a description of the proposed research for review by the research ethic committee and obtained a certificate of acceptability. Soon after, we left Montreal and embarked on a road trip across the United States that took us all the way down to the region once known as the Pass of the North: El Paso del Norte.

Map 1: Localization of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua

Source: Diagnóstico geosocioeconómico de Ciudad Juárez y su sociedad (Cervera 2006).

Ciudad Juárez is a city located in the Mexican state of Chihuahua (Map 1). It stands on the Rio Grande, across the border from El Paso, Texas. The border "twin city" complex of Ciudad Juarez-El Paso, with more than two million people, makes up the largest metropolitan region to span an international borderline in the world. Contradictorily, the cities sit side by side, one among the safest and one among the most dangerous in their respective countries.

Dangerous zone

> Cuidad Juárez must be the most dangerous place in the world for women.
> Sergio Gonzàlez Rodriguez
> (Le Monde Diplomatique, August 5, 2003)[1]

When I decided to do fieldwork in Ciudad Juarez, I knew very little about this place. I knew it was Mexico's *maquila* capital, home to three hundred factories and more than 200,000 workers, over half of them women (Staudt:2008). But I did not suspect that the world's eyes were about to turn to Ciudad Juárez as "the capital of murdered women", corruption and police impunity. A few weeks before my departure for the field in 2003, a grisly documentary called "Juarez, City of Impunity[2]" on the serial killing of women in Ciudad Juárez was broadcast on Radio-Canada's national television network.

For more than a decade, ghastly reports and documentaries have appeared about the murders of young women, raped and mutilated before death. In a 2003 investigation[3]

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[1] "Mexico: the city of deaths denied", by Sergio Gonzàlez Rodriguez: http://mondediplo.com/2003/08/05rodriguez

[2] "Juárez: ville d'impunité," by Canadian director Martine Forand was transmitted on the series *Grands Reportages* on Tuesday, June 10, 2003 at 20h00.

[3] Amnesty International. *Mexico: Intolerable Killings- Ten Years of Abductions and*

on female homicide (femicide) in Juárez, Amnesty International numbered 370 female murders from 1993 to 2003 of which about one-third may be serial murders (both figures are constantly disputed over the type of death or probable killers). The climate of extreme violence against women that dominates the city was a source of worry in the course of fieldwork preparation.

Many questions were running through my mind. How dangerous it would be for a woman researcher to carry out fieldwork alone in this context? How I would be able to work on an everyday basis under conditions of constant insecurity and limitation of movement? In a practical sense, how I would be able to secure data and maintain my own safety? After careful thought, being accompanied during fieldwork turned out to be the more appropriate way I have found to deal with the difficulties of doing ethnographic research in this potentially dangerous environment.

My husband, who is also a trained social anthropologist, was the ideal person to come with me and assist me in doing fieldwork. I though that it would be more prudent and less stressful to share the fieldwork with him, particularly in terms of issues associated with personal safety, emotional stability and efficiency. In the beginning of my fieldwork, he followed me everywhere to reconnoiter the area and helped greatly with questions and observations. Gradually, as the fieldwork progressed, I became more confident with people from the research setting and felt comfortable enough to go to familiar places by myself. People knew my husband was around and asked after him when he was not by my side on the field. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I could

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Murder of Women in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua. Amnesty International Publications, AI Index: AMR 41/026/2003. August 2003

count on him to come with me to any unfamiliar place that I was visiting for the first time.

From the moment we set foot in Ciudad Juárez, fear was palpable all over town and I realized that it would be an everyday part of field research. Black crosses on a pink background have been painted on telephone poles commemorating the women who have been murdered. There are also signs and billboards all over Juárez that warn "Be careful—watch for your life". Fear is the general state of most of the women of Juárez and they are constantly being reminded that they are in danger and need to keep safe. Girls and women of Juárez learn from a very young age how to behave "safely". Such safety rules include: don't dress provocatively; don't walk the streets alone; don't go to unfamiliar places alone; don't trust strangers; don't go out late at night; don't accept strange drinks or food from strangers; etc. Although it is difficult for the women of Juárez to live without fear, it would be impossible for most of them to have a normal life if they followed these rules at the letter.

In the same way, women anthropologists are required to transgress many ideas about "safe" behavior in their everyday work on the field. While researching crime and violence with a transnational migrant community in the Dominican Republic, Hannah Gill (2004) became aware that anthropological fieldwork often goes against rules of personal safety for women. As she correctly points out, "rules of personal safety are based on sticking to the familiar – the antithesis of anthropological research. If an anthropologist followed these rules, she would never go anywhere, try anything new, make any friends, or progress in research". Gill suggests that taking risks or seizing

opportunities is an essential component of fieldwork. The researcher must strike a balance that allows her to seize opportunities without jeopardizing her own safety.

A great deal of risk can be minimized by taking simple precautions. I invested in two cell phones to be able to contact my husband at any time and keep him informed about my comings and goings on the field. I gave him a call every time I arrived somewhere to tell him where and with who I was and each time I was about to leave a place. I spent a significant amount of time and energy in building a sustaining and protecting network of contacts that also became familiar with my accompanying husband. This friendship group is the researcher's safety net (Peritore 1990). My husband knew he could count on this people to help him in case of an emergency.

In the course of my ethnographic fieldwork, I had to undertake activities – walking downtown alone, taking public transports or driving in poor *colonias* on the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez – that were perceived as high-risk behaviors by local women who frequently warned me against potential dangers. I have always considered important to take their warnings seriously, especially after several months of fieldwork as my initial fears tend to disappear gradually. They were a constant reminder for a researcher desensitized to danger and risk not to lower one's guard.

Women anthropologists collecting fieldwork data in dangerous situations must face specific practical and methodological concerns. Although gender dynamics may put female researchers at risk, there are also advantages that come with being a woman anthropologist and that can make a significant difference in the collection of ethnographic data. Considering that the subject of my research is predominantly related to the women's

world, being a female anthropologist has greatly facilitated my access in many observation settings on the field.

Participant Observation

The primary research methodology I used was participant observation, a pre-eminent tool in the study of "illicit" activities (Fadahunsi 2000). I did participant observation into the organization of the used clothing retail trade in several urban and street markets (*tianguis*) of Ciudad Juárez. I spent significant time in these markets, observing the flow of business and the interactions between traders and customers.

During the period of my fieldwork, I also spent long hours with them in the El Paso warehouses helping them to sort through the bales of second-hand clothes. I regularly followed my informants in their buying-for-reselling shopping trips across the border. I crossed the international bridges into El Paso, and then back again into Juárez many times a week. I had a valid Canadian passport and have never experienced any trouble crossing the border in either direction. I would either cross the border with my informants on foot or meet them in downtown El Paso if I was driving my car across the border to avoid any problems with U.S. customs.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I spent long hours of waiting at the international bridges. This is because the time spent can be considerable for crossing into the United States, considering the congestion at the ports of entry. You never know how long the crossing will take: ten minutes, forty-five, an hour? It is impossible to plan what time of day to go, or which lane to choose. As soon as you think you have figured out, they change the number of gates that are open. You always have to leave some extra

time. Moreover, since 9/11, the bridges are systematically closed for an unpredictable period of time whenever U.S customs authorities receive warnings about bomb attacks.

Interviews

Apart from participant observation, I also conducted informal interviews with Mexican ant traders. A non-probability sampling was used. The majority of the unstructured and informal interviews resulted from chance meetings with informants at El Paso warehouses or at markets in Ciudad Juarez. Taped interviews on illicit activities proved especially difficult. After a few recorded interviews with used clothing traders, I decided to hand over my tape recorder, when it became clear that they, despite having agreed to the interview, became nervous and suspicious of my intentions.

Before conducting any interview I explained to my informants precisely how I would use the information collected for research and possible publication purposes. I assured them that they could end the interview at any time they wanted to, and could refuse to answer any uncomfortable questions. To ensure the anonymity of my informants I did not record any personal names or items of information that could reveal their identities in my notebooks and I made use of pseudonyms in recording data. I also informed my informants that I would use these pseudonyms in my thesis and in any publications that may result from it. Since many people I worked with were engaged in illicit activities, such as illegal border crossings and smuggling, I refrained from asking them to sign forms of consent for conducting interviews. Furthermore, since most people I worked with were illiterate, or did not completely understand the use of consent forms, I did not get written consent for conducting interviews, but instead relied on verbal consent.

I did follow a more structured interview schedule with wholesalers of American used clothing in El Paso and government officials in Juarez. Although they were initially somewhat suspicious about the intentions of my study, all used clothing wholesale dealers approached for an interview, except one, agreed to participate. The used clothing industry in El Paso is a legal business that could not survive without its illegal counterpart in Juárez and those who sell used clothing to Mexico's fayuqueros are aware of the contradictory nature of their situation. Some of them carry on long-term business relationships with Juárez merchants who buy the *ropa usada* in El Paso, where the clothing is sold legally, and smuggle the clothes into Mexico. Many used clothing dealers are annoyed with repeated media criticism of their relationship to the smugglers of used clothing into Mexico and are not particularly anxious to discuss their activities, although I have indeed met people who provided much detail.

Extensive coverage in Juárez newspapers amplified official perspectives, for although some Juárez officials were interviewed[4], Mexican Customs authorities, for example, were extremely difficult to approach. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I have made several attempts to interview the head of Mexican Customs in Cd. Juárez without success. Thus, a very useful source has been Juárez Newspapers (*Diario de Juárez* and *El Norte*) for they extensively cover conflicts concerning popular markets and Mexican customs authorities. I collected a clipping file of more than 200 articles from local newspapers. While journalistic reports are often sensationalist, they do identify important issues. I also conducted library research at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ), the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), the Instituto

[4] In Juárez, official and leader interviews occurred with people in the following positions: municipal commerce director, *Cámara Nacional de Comercio* representative, *Secretaría de Economía* representative, *Comité de Defensa Popular* Leaders, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez professors.

Municipal de Investigacion y Planeacion (IMIP), the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Library and the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies (CIBS).

Thesis Outline

The following chapter examines briefly the politico-legal regime surrounding second-hand clothing imports in Mexico and addresses current political, legal and economic issues about the development of the used clothing trade between the United States and Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It focuses on the ongoing debates surrounding used clothing imports and commercial regulations in Mexico and questions straightforward causal connections between used clothing imports and the crisis that the Mexican textile industry has been facing lately.

Chapter Three explores briefly the historical formation of the U.S.-Mexico border and traces the history of the formation of the U.S.-Mexico border development over the past several decades of a dynamic informal recycling economy along the El Paso–Juárez border. It documents the presence of used clothing dealers in the commercial landscape of downtown El Paso in the mid-1960. It provides evidence of the major role played by small scale cross-border trading of used goods in the regional economy during the Maquiladora Period (1967–1986). It also recalls how second-hand consumption became a crucial survival strategy in the border region during the economic crisis of the early 1980s and how popular used clothing was at that time among low-income Mexican border consumers.

Chapter Four, Five and Six correspond to three different stages in the cross-border small-scale trading between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. They also correspond to different observed settings in the research process. The thread running through these three

chapters/stages is the means through which value is created from used clothing. To move from one side of the border to the other, used clothes must be transformed in some way to become of potential value to Mexican consumers. These three chapters look at how this happens along the Mexico-U.S. border.

Chapter Four focuses on the first stage including travelling abroad and sourcing second-hand clothing. Chapter Five details the second stage of small-scale cross-border trading i.e. the transport of goods across international borders. Chapter Six concentrates on the third stage of cross-border small-scale trading which covers the informal marketing and selling of second-hand clothes. This chapter also follows the flow of second-hand clothing from the retail scene into the local clothing universe of the Northern Mexican borderlands. It addresses the cultural and social development of consumerism and secondhand clothing practices on the border, examining brand name clothing and other youthful fashions such as the "Pachuco" and "Cholo" dress styles.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CRIMINAL LIFE OF SECOND HAND CLOTHING

This chapter focuses on import prohibitions on used clothing in Latin America and the politico-legal regime surrounding second-hand clothing imports in Mexico. It addresses current political, legal and economic issues about the development of the used clothing trade between the United States and Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It focuses on the ongoing debates surrounding used clothing imports and commercial regulations in Mexico and questions straightforward causal connections between used clothing imports and the crisis that the Mexican textile industry is currently facing.

The global used clothing trade

Although not new, the global circulation of secondhand clothing from the West to the Third World has expanded rapidly over the past two decades. According to the industry association for used-clothes exporters (SMART), the U.S. used-clothes industry started about 60 years ago. The industry expanded in the 1980s as liberalized trade regulations provided more opportunities for exporters.

The United States is the world's largest exporter of used clothing (Hansen 2000:114). American exports of used clothing have grown both in volume and value over the last fifteen years. In 2005, the United States shipped 1.23 billion pounds of used clothing overseas, worth $267 millions (*The News Tribune*, March, 12, 2006; OCDE 2005) compared to US$ 174 million in 1990 (Hansen 2000, 115).

The largest single source of the garments that fuels this multibillion-dollar-a-year, globe-spanning industry is the donations American consumers make to charitable organizations such as the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries. To begin with, the excess of secondhand clothing originates in American private households and homes. As Hansen (2000:11) points out, by the midtwentieth century, developments in the mass production of fashion combined with shifts in income distribution and growing purchasing power enabled more consumers than ever before to buy not only new, but more clothes. Such dress practices produced and enormous yield of used but still wearable clothes, some of which ended up as donations to charity. Meanwhile, many charitable organizations began emphasizing stores sales in the late 1950s.

The Secondary Materials and Recycled Textile Association (SMART) estimates that American consumers, on average, give away or throw out 68 pounds of clothing and

other textiles – as much as 2.5 billion pounds total – each year most of it ending up in landfills (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 24, 2006). Roughly 15 percent of that is recycled, mostly through Goodwill and the Salvation Army (*San Antonio Express-News,* August 22, 2005). The amount of used clothing donated to charities is so large that they cannot handle it. So after selling half, or less, of the garments donated in their thrift shops, charitable organizations dispose of their massive overstock at bulk prices to commercial secondhand clothing dealers which in turn export it throughout the world (Hansen 2000:103).

Import prohibitions on used clothing in Latin America

Different countries subject imported American second-hand clothing to various trade policies, ranging from liberalization to protectionist. The global trade of second-hand clothing is not without controversy. As mentioned by the executive director of the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association (SMART), almost 30 countries have banned the importation of used clothing. Others have restrictions, such as high tariffs or expensive licenses, that make it too expensive for companies to export clothes there (The News Tribune, March, 12, 2006). A recent review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of trade policy data for 85 member countries of the World Trade Organization found that there are import prohibitions in place in Latin American countries like Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic.

In the same way, Bolivia has recently decided to ban used clothing imports in an attempt to protect native clothing industries. Used clothing imports make up an estimated $40 million business annually in Bolivia. This country has an estimated 15,000 used

clothing sellers or "*ropavejeros*", organized into unions. And while some of these "*ropavejeros*" have signed up for job training and loans under a new government program, others have protested in opposition to the used clothing ban. Although much of the used clothing entering Bolivia each year is thought to come from the United States, this country already relies mainly on smugglers crossing over from Chile, the number three importer of American second-hand clothing. This situation raises doubts whether the used clothing ban can actually halt the trade (*USA Today*, July 17, 2007).

Figure 1: Two Aymara women wearing traditional clothes shop for used clothing at a street market in El Alto, Bolivia.

Photograph by Dado Galdieri

Despite of import prohibitions, black markets continue to emerge as goods move across borders to meet market demands. In the Dominican Republic, for example, this trade has been going on for years and has been growing in volume since the government approved the operation of two free zone companies authorized to import packs of used

clothes for export to Haiti. Most of the clothes classified by the free zones find their way back to the Dominican Republic through a long legal and illegal distribution network involving customs agents, the military and hundreds of small-time Dominican and Haitian entrepreneurs. The Dominican Republic government announced subsequently that secondhand clothing could no longer be imported into the Dominican Republic in order to control the used clothing coming across the border from Haiti (*Daily News*, June 5, 2002).

Secondhand clothing from the United States, called pèpè, has inundated Haiti. The origin of the term pèpè may have initiated with crowds who mocked a preacher who began handing out the clothes while trying to calm the recipients, shouting, "Paix! Paix!"—French for peace. This term might have also come from the inscriptions on boxes headed for Port-de-Paix (PP). Another expression goes back to the 1960s, when the United States started sending secondhand goods to Haiti as part of an international aid program launched by President John F. Kennedy. The president became the emblem of the used garments arriving from his administration. Even today, many older people in Haiti still talk of "wearing kennedy (Shell and Bertozzi 2006)."

Used Clothing: An Illegally Imported Commodity in Mexico

Although used clothing or *"ropa usada"* is a restricted import in Mexico, it remains a highly desired and popular commodity sold everywhere in urban markets throughout the whole country. The Mexican government has adopted numerous protectionist policies concerning the importation of used clothing for resale in Mexico over the past several decades. Like most countries that forbid or restrict the commercial importation of secondhand clothing, Mexico does it in an effort to protect domestic

textile and garment industries. Many accounts of the Mexican textile industry lobbying the Mexican government to end the importation of used clothing from the United States have appeared in local newspapers.

In 1992, a Mexican coalition of businessmen presented a petition asking the Mexican authorities to legislate against the entrance of *ropa usada* (used clothing) from the United States. The coalition argued that the *fayuca hormiga* ("ant smuggling") was harming the production of Mexican clothing and that the Mexican Secretariat of Commerce and Industrial Development (Secofi)[6] was ignoring its petition because thousands of people were involved in this activity at the border. The coalition's efforts were intended to denounce the fact that the trade in used clothing had never been under control at the border (*El Norte*, May 30, 1992).

The concern raised most frequently by Mexican authorities is the adverse effect of used clothing imports on the production of Mexican clothing, an argument that is often coupled with hygiene and public health issues. According to the president of the Mexican National Chamber of the Textile Industry (Canaintex), used clothes present health risks to consumers: "Used clothing is totally insalubrious so, not only to protect the productive chain, but also to protect people's health, it is necessary to eliminate the illegal importation of those products" (*Vanguardia* March 21, 2006).

Mexico's trade restrictions on used clothing imports give rise to contrasting discourses from Mexican and American political officials. According to the Legal Counsel for International Trade at the Mexico Embassy in Washington, "We cannot say that in order to clean up the corruption in Mexico we are going to make a free trade on a product such as used clothing. If there is corruption in Mexico we certainly will fight it

and we are fighting it." He added that the restriction helps "maintain competitiveness in the industry." On one hand you can say, 'Yeah, used clothing is going to be helpful for poor people.' That's a true statement," he said. "But on the other hand, those poor people work for the industry, as well. So, if the industry goes down, they will have access to used clothing, but they will not have jobs." (*San Antonio Express-News,* August 22, 2005). However, the Deputy Assistant US Trade Representative for North America declared, "Any restrictions that Mexico has in place we would like to eliminate. There are very few prohibitions. That makes used clothing unique" (*San Antonio Express-News,* August 22, 2005).

Indeed, used clothing was considered a very specific case in NAFTA negotiations and documents. Section 9 of Annex 300-B states: "The Parties have established a Committee on Trade in Worn Clothing, comprising representatives of each Party." Initially, this committee's mandate was to "assess the potential benefits and risks that could result from the elimination of existing restrictions on trade between the Parties in worn clothing, including the effects on business and employment opportunities, and on the market for textile and apparel goods in each Party." This specific section of NAFTA also states: "A Party may maintain restrictions in effect on the date of entry into force of the NAFTA on the importation of worn clothing, unless the Parties agree otherwise on the basis of the recommendations presented to the Commission by the Committee on Trade in Worn Clothing".

A 1997 report on the NAFTA Committee on Trade in Worn Clothing, made available by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, confirmed that the American and Mexican representatives to this committee first met

informally in April 1994 and that all three Parties (Canada being the third party) attended a formal meeting held two years later in Mexico City. This report does not, however, provide any updated information on the work accomplished by the NAFTA Committee since 1996.

Trade Regulations on Used Clothing and the NAFTA

In preparation to its entry into the NAFTA (1994), the Mexican government began gradually to allow the import of (most of the) goods from the United States without prohibitively high tariffs. This move toward the liberalization of its trade policies has come along with a massive reorganization of its customs service (Spener and Roberts 1998:88, Staudt 1998:72). But with regard to the importation of used clothing, the Mexican government has followed quite a different orientation. As Heyman correctly points out, the NAFTA "does not so much eliminate commodity controls at the Mexican border (and interior checkpoints) as it changes them from a focus on tariffs to one on import registration and tracking, which is already the practice with respect to maquiladoras. Most consumer goods, for example, will not be taxed upon entry; instead, the Mexican government now requires importation licenses, which are much easier to obtain for large importers than medium to small ones, and thus continues the role of customs in inspection and "rent" collecting" (Heyman 2004:319).

Officially, the Mexican government legally restricted the trade in used clothing to those holding an import license *(permiso previo)* from the Direction of External Trade (*Dirección General de Comercio Exterior*) of the Ministry of Economy (*Secretaría de Economía*). Apparently, however, the Ministry of Economy has never received a request

for an import licence. Moreover, among the Mexican authorities, there seems to be different interpretations of used-clothing trade regulations.

In an interview given to a Juarez journalist in November 2003, the head (*administrador*) of the customs office in Juarez did not seem to know the exact reasons why the importation of used clothing was regulated in Mexico (*El Diario*, November 24, 2003). After claiming sanitary reasons ("because, it could bring a lot of diseases"), he rapidly changed his mind when informed that sanitary authorities did not have jurisdiction over the import of used clothing. Only after some investigation was the *administrador* able to say that the importation of second-hand clothing in Mexico was regulated by the Ministry of Economy. A Ministry of Economy official interviewed by the same journalist did confirm that his office was in charge of delivering import licences for used clothing but indicated that in twelve years no one had ever applied for such a licence: "Nobody has presented a solicitude, which means that nobody is authorized to import used clothing" (*El Diario*, November 24, 2003).

According to the same official, it would be very difficult for traders to fulfill all of the specific requirements for an import licence. For example, they must provide information on the country of origin of the clothes and the classification of the garments, according to their material, in order for the customs tax to be fixed, as well as detailed fiscal information, which, because most traders operate informally, would be very difficult. The official concluded by assuming that the licence would probably be denied anyway: "The Mexican textile industry would probably go against it, but this is unsure until someone makes an application" (*El Diario*, November 24, 2003).

This kind of discourse on the adverse effect of used clothing imports on domestic and textile and garment industries is widespread in the media and has already been criticized by Hansen (2004) in the course of her research in Zambia. The author argues that many countries which are large importers of used clothing are also textile and garment exporters like Kenya, Pakistan and Malaysia for example (Hansen 2004b:4). According to Pietra Rivoli (2005) who has studied the second life of clothing for her book, *The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy*, in many developing countries, the domestic manufacturers are making clothing for export, leaving local consumers with few inexpensive options.

This is also the case in a country like Mexico which is both a large importer of American used clothing and one of the largest textile and garment exporters to the United States. The Maquiladora Export Industry has grown significantly in the textile sector following the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 (Labrecque 2005 :56). In 2001, Mexico ranked fourth among textile-exporting countries and was the largest exporter to the U.S. market. That same year China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and quickly became the largest clothing supplier to the United States. As a result, Mexico fell to second position in 2002 (Olivares 2006).

In 2004, Mexico was still the second-largest clothing exporter *to the* United States, a situation that is probably going to change rapidly in the next years considering the expiration in 2005 of the Multifibre Agreement (MFA) quota system that regulated the global trade of textiles and clothing for the WTO members (Olivares 2006). U.S. imports from Vietnam have grown strongly since the country joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2007. Moreover, clothing imports from other supplying

countries—namely Bangladesh, Cambodia, Honduras and Indonesia—grew in 2007 while imports from Mexico fell during this period. To be sure, the boom that Mexico's textile sector has experienced following the country's entry into the NAFTA has obviously come to an end.

According to National Clothing Industry Chamber (CNIV) Vice President Antonio Kuri Alam, the Mexican clothing industry lost more than 2.5 billion dollars in the first half of 2001, because half of the nation's clothing sales take place in the informal economy, often with contraband products. Mexico's textile sector is concerned about a rising rate of used 'garbage' clothing imports form the US which is helping to exacerbate the country's large contraband trade. The National Garment Industry Chamber, for example, estimates that 58 percent of clothing bought in Mexico enters the country illegally (*New York Times*, June 5, 2003).

According to Juárez Núñez (2004), the crisis that the Mexican textile industry has been going through over the last years has more to do with a policy of industrial development oriented almost exclusively towards the export market. The textile sector in Mexico presents a very strong dependence on the U.S. market and a very high vulnerability towards global economic dynamics. The author argues that the impact of used clothing imports on the Mexican textile industry is nothing compared to the strong diminution that this sector has been facing on the level of exports.

Although NAFTA has incontestably brought a freer flow of "legitimate" commodities among the United States, Mexico, and Canada, thus creating new opportunities in Mexico for commerce to capture markets inside the country, *fayuqueros*

have continued to respond to strong consumer demand for all sorts of contraband goods, such as used clothing, that continue to fall outside the scope of NAFTA regulations.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORIC BACKGROUG AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

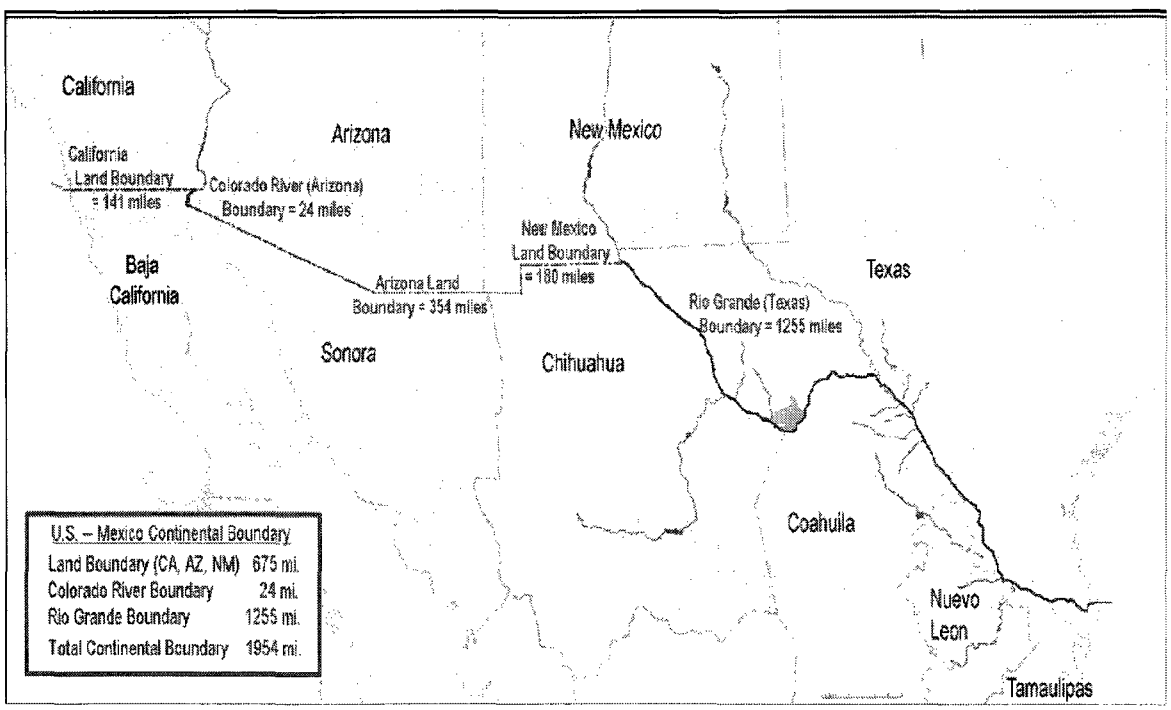
El Paso, Juárez. Juárez, El Paso.
So different, yet tendrils of one so rooted in the other—
families with cousins on one side, brothers just across the Rio Grande.
Back and forth; here for one thing, there for another.
Edberg 2004

This chapter explores briefly the historical formation of the U.S.-Mexico border and traces the history of the development over the past several decades of a dynamic informal recycling economy along the El Paso–Juárez. It documents the expansion of the *ropa usada* trade in the 1960s and shows its crucial importance in the border region during the economic crisis of the early 1980s. This chapter also provides some socio-economic contextual background on Ciudad Juárez.

The creation of the Mexico-U.S. border

The Mexico-U.S. border officially stretches 1,954 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, according to figures given by the International Boundary and Water Commission. It is the most frequently crossed international border in the world, with over 350 million legal crossings every year. The Rio Grande boundary which totals 1,255 miles constitutes more than half the length of the border. As shown on the map below, the river cuts through the middle of New Mexico to the site of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, at the junction of Chihuahua and Texas.

Map 2: The Rio Grande boundary



Source: International Boundary and Water Commission, United States and Mexico.

At that point, because of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which brought an official end to the Mexican-American War (1846–48), the Rio Grande becomes the

international boundary between the two countries.

Before the signing of the Treaty, this entire region was part of northern Mexico and was known as the Pass of the North: El Paso del Norte. The treaty called for Mexico to give up almost half of its territory and established the Rio Grande as the new international line. The part of Paso del Norte south of the river became known as Ciudad Juárez, named after the Mexican president Benito Juárez. As Americo Paredes (1993) mentions, "Friends and relatives who had been near neighbors [...] now were legally in different countries". However, the division of the Pass of the North into Ciudad Juarez and El Paso did not put an end to the strong social and economic relationships between the two cities.

According to Vila (2000:16), "this was so because the area is isolated; almost nothing can be found for several hundreds miles." Mexican consumers had since the city's foundation (as the Pass of the North) acquired from the U.S. everything residents needed but could not find locally. In comparison to their Juarense counterparts, wholesale and retail vendors in EI Paso benefited from a greater access to manufactured goods through the booming nineteenth century transcontinental trade that came with the expansion of the American West. As Sarah Hill (2003:164) explains, until the arrival of the national rail line in 1881 Juarez shoppers had to satisfy virtually all of their basic consumer needs on the other side of the border.

As indicated by Oscar Martínez (1978:70), *Juarenses* from all social spheres were used to walk across the bridge from El Paso with goods for their everyday consumption; petty traders on a daily basis cross merchandise in small quantities for their stores; and *fayuqueros* or professional contrabandists, constantly smuggled goods. They all brought

with them across the border goods on which they tried to evade paying duty. Quite obviously, present-day borderlanders who bring in foreign goods and pay *mordidas* (bribes) to officials are carrying on a local tradition that began in the nineteenth century.

The existence of a lively southward trade in contraband goes back a long way in the history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. O'Day and Lopez (2001) offer an interesting perspective to the history of the time. According to them, one of the effects of the American invasion of Mexico during the U.S.-Mexican war (1846–48) was Mexico's acquiescence to the importation of American cotton. Nonetheless, even with American cotton, the Mexican production of textiles remained insufficient to provide enough clothes for its population. In addition, a 50% customs duty on imported fabric contributed to the creation of an impressive system of smuggling from the United States. As the 19th century progressed, it is estimated that 30% of the textiles sold in Mexico were smuggled in by *fayuqueros* (O'Day and Lopez 2001:233). As O'Day and Lopez point out "This tradition has continued down to the present day, with the dry goods of choice now being ready-to-wear used clothing".

Borders, according to Americo Paredes (1993), are the classic sites not only for smuggling but for the idealization of the smuggler. There was a generally positive attitude toward the person who traded with little regard for customs and immigration laws. The *fayuquero* or professional contrabandist who smuggled Mexican tequila into Texas or American woven goods into Mexico was not subject to social disapproval. On the contrary, there was a tendency to idealize the smuggler in border folklore and the "corrido" tradition which developed long the Rio Grande. The Mexican "corrido" is a form of musical folk ballad in which the protagonist defends his rights and those of other

Mexican against the rinches (Texas Rangers). Of particular interest is "EI Corrido de Mariano Resendez," about a legendary smuggler of textiles into Mexico at the turn of the 20thcentury who violated Mexican laws and battled with Mexican customs officers (Paredes 1993). Resendez and his activities were so highly admired that he was known as "EI Contrabandista" and his story is still sung today. Paredes's work on the border corrido illustrates the extent to which "smuggling had long been part of the border way of life".

Smuggling ordinary goods was and remains a generalized tendency among Mexican cross-border shoppers. As Oscar Martinez (1994:314) noted, "Over time, the only changes in the contraband game have been in the volume of the merchandise making its way from one country to the other and in the strategies invented to circumvent the law". Martínez (1978:70) quotes the following excerpt from a newspaper of the 1920s which provides a very good illustration of the situation prevailing along the border.

> Everything consumed at the border comes from American stores, free of duty. He who wants a coat wears it while crossing; he who wants new shoes wears them and puts his old pair, which do not have to pay duty, in the box. Men's suits are brought in piecemeal: today the coat, tomorrow the slacks, and later the vest; the tie and the socks are inserted in the person's pockets, out of sight of the customs inspector. This officer moreover, will pretend he does not see certain hard to conceal items like lard, and will allow their free entry because he too has a family and understands well the tragedy of having to buy everything on the Mexican side.
>
> El Universal, December 9, 1925

Throughout most of the twentieth-century, Mexican consumers could find a wide variety of goods in El Paso and at much lower prices than in Ciudad Juarez. "By the mid-twentieth century, the high cost of freighting Mexican made goods to Juárez yielded an anemic retail market there, while lower American freight costs enhanced El Paso's dynamic retail sector. Soon Mexicans who could cross the border to shop came to prefer American brands" (Hill 2009).

Those who were unable to cross the border and could not pay for the high-priced, locally produced goods could count on the emergent trade in second-hand American commodities that developed together with the cross-border flow of brand-new goods. Consumer culture along the Northern Mexican borderlands was therefore closely connected with American consumer culture of the other side of the border. Discarded items in the United States were often incorporated to Mexican fronterizo consumer culture. As indicated by Hill, consumers on both sides of the border came to reckon on a vibrant "economy of discards" (Hill 2009).

The economy of discards along the U.S.-Mexico border

The very first second-hand market or *"segundas"* of Ciudad Juarez opened in 1950 in one of Juárez' oldest working-class neighborhood, La Chaveña. The market known as "los cerrajeros" included about 40 vendors who were initially specialized in locks – (cerrajero means locksmith). Over time, the market offered used tools, appliances, and kitchen wares imported from the United States. In the early 1950s, people who were selling used goods in "los cerrajeros" collected them directly from the El Paso city dump which was located back then on what is now known as the Chamizal area in Ciudad Juarez (Hill:2005). When this portion of land was officially transferred to Mexico in 1967

following the Binational Chamizal Agreement, they had no other choice than to venture further on the American side of the border to collect used goods directly from the streets of El Paso. A 79 years old man who has been working in the "cerrajeros" market over the past fifty years remembered: "From what was the dump and from what we collected from the back-alleys on the *gabacho* side, we have survived hundreds if not thousands of families on this side of the border" (*Diario de Juárez*, August 15, 2005).

Castellanos (1981:191) has interviewed a man whose living was to supply the "cerrajeros" in Ciudad Juárez. He had worked illegally in El Paso from 1924 and 1936 as a truck driver before being deported in Mexico. His knowledge of English helped him when he started to buy second-hand goods in El Paso to sell them in Ciudad Juárez in the mid-1960s. This used goods dealer recalled that, until the mid-1970s, the U.S. Army base in Fort Bliss had been selling military discards to the population of Ciudad Juárez.

According to my interviews with used goods dealers in Mexico, American merchandise was easily brought into Ciudad Juárez on the *ferrocarril* (railroad). Everything could be carried on the train from El Paso to Juarez, if not further into Mexico, from old motors and tires to used clothes. Many old resellers of used goods in the "cerrajeros" refer to the period when the train connecting El Paso and Ciudad Juárez could be used to cross the border as the "golden years" of the second-hand trade. According to them, the sales in the second-hand market went down considerably when the train ceased its operation and was closed to the public in the mid-1970s.

The economy of discards along the Northern Mexican border started to grow rapidly with the boom of the Maquiladora Export Industry. During the Maquiladora Period (1967–1986), a significant trade in used goods brought from the United States to

Mexico developed along the border. Vast amounts of second-hand goods (cars, stoves, clothes, etc.) began to flow from the United States into the border cities of Mexico (Heyman 1994b: 191). Because second-hand goods are far less expansive, the prices are more in accordance with Mexican households buying power. According to Heyman (2001:140), new households quickly took advantages in access to American goods, especially inexpensive used ones.

The informal brokering of used goods into Mexico provided a very good opportunity for small-scale entrepreneurship in Mexican border cities during the Maquiladora period (Spener and Roberts 1998:93). Legitimate brokers and *fayuqueros* (smugglers) on the Mexican side could act as brokers of goods, smuggled or legal, for buyers in both their own cities and in the Mexican interior. They had close dealings with small businesses on the Texas side, serving as intermediaries between the Texas border entrepreneurs and Mexican customers (Spener and Roberts 1998:99). Because much of this activity took place extra-legally and clandestinely, it is difficult to estimate its extent either in terms of the value of goods or the number of people employed. However, qualitative accounts of this brokering activity led Spener and Roberts (1998, 86) to conclude that it was a vital part of the regional economy (see also Castellanos 1981; Anderson and de la Rosa 1991; Hellman 1994).

One of the most revealing of these accounts was Joan Anderson and Martin de la Rosa's (1991) study "Economic Survival Strategies of Poor Families on the Mexican Border." The authors showed how, as compared to the interior of the country, the border maintained a more dynamic economy, sustained by tourism and the maquiladora industry, during the economic crisis of the early 1980s (1991:66). Moreover, their study

revealed the different ways in which the border environment favourably influenced coping strategies, one of the most important being the existence of an "economy of discards" from the United States (1991:54).

In "*Ciudad Juárez: La Vida Fronteriza*", Alicia Castellanos (1981:189) mentions the existence of a category of workers who legally cross the border to buy merchandise in El Paso in order to resell it in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. According to her, these workers were commonly known as « fayuqueros », « chiveros » or smugglers and appear as a phenomenon characteristic of international borders. Castellanos remarked that the devaluation of the peso in 1976 had a strong impact on this type of workers: after the devaluation, for example, a woman reminded that she could no longer buy new merchandise but only second-hand (1981:191).

Josiah Heyman's work on consumption along the border area of Agua Prieta, Sonora and the nearby Arizona town of Douglas provides a useful insight into how Mexico's economic crisis after 1982 has altered life on the border for working people. The nearly constant devaluations of the peso not only made it ever harder to obtain goods in Mexico but also closed channels through which border city residents had obtained American goods (Heyman 1991:176). Second-hand goods brought from the United States also became less accessible to Mexican border consumers.

Used good dealers inside Agua Prieta told Heyman that rapid devaluations essentially put them out of that business: "a sixty-dollar used stove from the United States, for example at one time a very affordable expense, was now an entire week's income for a Sonoran household" (Heyman 1997:176). As Heyman explains, border residents are more susceptible of being affected by the devaluation of the peso against the

dollar because American-origin goods (sold in either nation) are ultimately priced in dollars, and therefore they became suddenly expensive. Although the existence of an "economy of discards" from the United States became a crucial survival strategy in the border region (Anderson and de la Rosa 1991:54), the Mexican economic crisis of the early 1980s was a very difficult time for secondhand traders and consumers along Mexico's northern border.

The second-hand trade included used furniture, kitchen appliances as well as salvaged materials from demolished houses (doors, windows, roofing metal, plumbing and electrical wiring), which were particularly in demand during the home-building years (Heyman 1991:175). The U.S. side also provided a steady supply of used automobiles and materials such as used tires, which were in demand for use not only on cars, but also as retaining walls for houses, fences, and stairways. As Anderson and de la Rosa (1991:66) noted, "trash is recycled in practical ways to improve the quality of life within the context of poverty".

Second-hand clothing stood out among the items in this trade. According to Anderson and de la Rosa (1991:59), second-hand clothing was the most widely used type of discards from the United States by low-income border families. Indeed, in almost all of the above-cited study's cases, families reported relying mainly on used clothing. In one case, second-hand sales provided extra income. The female head of the household visited garage sales in the United States each week, buying used clothing and then sold it in front of her house on weekends (Anderson and de la Rosa 1991:65).

The *ropa usada* trade (1940-1960)

The used clothing business along the U.S.-Mexico border probably goes back to

the early decades of the twentieth century, if not earlier. There is some evidence in the literature that confirms the presence of stores selling used clothing in downtown El Paso in the 1940s. Of particular interest is Gloria López-Stafford's novel "*A Place in El Paso: A Mexican-American Childhood*" which chronicles her childhood in El Paso, Texas during the 1940s. Stafford's father was a *ropa usada* man, a used clothing dealer, who had a store in the downtown area.

His customers were poor Mexicans on both sides of the Rio Grande (Stafford 1996:9). He bought clothing in huge cardboard boxes from many places in the United States – clothes for all seasons, shoes, underwear, hats, even corsets – without knowing exactly what was rolled up inside. Thus, each shipment would bring with it good and bad surprises. Stafford remembers that whenever her father got a shipment, they would be as excited as children on Christmas morning. Sometimes he would get great stuff; at others he would get junk no one would buy. Stafford (1996:41) also recalls how her father was hit by the excitement of the end of the war and became optimistic that business in *ropa usada* was beginning to pick up.

Businesses selling commercially American used clothing in downtown El Paso began to grow noticeably in the late 1950s. According to my interviews with used clothing wholesale dealers in El Paso, there were already 10 to 15 small used clothing shops on South El Paso Street back in the mid-1960s. In those days, the international streetcar service between Juarez and El Paso transported throngs of Juarez shoppers across the downtown bridge leading to the American city's streets at nominal cost (Martínez 1978). The following picture of the El Paso city lines taken in the mid-1960s shows the streetcar rolling in front of two *ropa usada* thrift stores in downtown El Paso.

Figure 2: *Ropa usada* thrift stores, El Paso, Texas, 1964, Ken Josephson collection.

Photograph by R. Hill

While in the 1960s and the 1970s the second-hand clothing retail scene was dominated by charitable organizations in most parts of the United States (Hansen 2000:11), it also involved a growing number of commercial used clothing dealers in American border cities like El Paso. One of the very first wholesalers of used clothing to establish himself on South El Paso Street back in 1965 was the Chamizal Trading Company. At the beginning, the Chamizal started by supplying other smaller stores in downtown El Paso whose original source of supply was Los Angeles with used clothing shipped directly from New York.

Soon after, the company was selling used clothing not only to buyers who lived

right across the border but also to customers travelling from the interior of Mexico. Later on in the 1970s, the Chamizal Trading Company even had stores in other American border cities like McAllen, Laredo and Brownsville. When it would get difficult for their customers to cross the merchandise at one place of the border, like in Juarez for example, they would simply go to buy used clothing from the McAllen store, and if the border was tightened up, let say in Laredo, they would go get it in Brownsville and cross it over the border at that place.

This family-owned business from New York had moved to the border in search of different markets because the used clothing export market in New York had kind of fallen in hard times back then. By way of a market study they had found that there was a great potential along the Mexican border for used clothing. They were attracted by the marked increase in the demand for used clothes by their southern neighbours attributable to the rapid economic and population growth experienced by Mexico's northern border cities.

Population and economic growth in Ciudad Juarez

Ciudad Juarez, with a population of 55,000 in 1940, inflated to 400,000 in 1970 and nearly 800,000 in 1990. Tijuana, Mexicali, and other border cities have grown comparably. Between 1990 and 2000, Ciudad Juárez's population grew by about 50% (from 0.8 million to 1.2 million) and is projected to continue to expand. The National Council of Population (CONAPO) project as a medium estimate that Ciudad Juarez will reach 2 million in population by year 2015 (Cervera 2006:43). The continuing population growth of the border over the last several decades is mostly due to the migration of people from the interior of the country, people in search of better employment opportunities and higher standards of living.

Over the past twenty years, and especially since the 1980s, the main driving force of Ciudad Juarez's population growth has been the ever-increasing labor demand stimulated by a major attractor of workforce: the maquiladora export industry. The border's demographic boom has its roots in the industrialization process initiated in the mid-1960s, when *maquiladoras* first set up shop in northern Mexico under the auspices of the Border Industrialization Program (BIP). These foreign-owned (usually American and Asian) assembly plants take advantage of a commercial agreement through which they are allowed to import supplies from other countries without paying duties, assemble the product in Mexico, and export it back without paying duties aside from the value added.

The maquiladora industry began in 1965 and experienced slow but steady growth. Ciudad Juárez received its first factory under the BIP in 1966 and Mexico's first industrial park two years later (Labrecque 2005 :45). Between 1970 and 1974, the number of plants in Juárez increased from 22 to 89, and employees from 3,165 to 17,484 (Martinez 1978:132). In 1990, there were already 270 plants in place, employing over 132,795 people. By 2000, the number of employees almost doubled to over a quarter of a million (262,805) and Ciudad Juárez was home to 308 maquiladora plants (Cervera 2006:124).

However, the industry's growth has slowed, and even reversed when the U.S. economy entered the early 2000s recession. In the first three years of the decade, the number of plants and workers they employed declined. In 2002, the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) reported a strong diminution of the number of workers in the maquiladora industry with more than 116,000 jobs lost in

Ciudad Juárez (Cervera 2006:124). In 2003, some 271 plants employed approximately 194,642 workers (INEGI, 2007). Some of the maquiladoras had relocated to China, and there was a widespread fear that this was the beginning of the end of the industry that was established in northern Mexico in 1965. In spite of the 'crisis' of 2001 there has been recuperation in the maquiladora sector in Juarez. In 2006, some 284 plants employed approximately 240, 000 workers (INEGI, 2007).

Nowadays, the maquiladoras continue to play a major role in the economies of Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua State. Not only do the maquiladoras provide an estimated 240,000 direct jobs in Ciudad Juarez alone, but they also represent a source of additional jobs and income for suppliers and local businesses. The influence of the maquiladora industry on the city's economy is so strong that the Ciudad Juarez branch of the National Chamber of Commerce (CANACO) estimates that each job in an assembly plant generates three jobs in the commercial sector (Diario de Juárez 29 October, 2007).

Mexico 's National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) indicates that Ciudad Juarez 's maquiladora industry had an economic impact of about $4.6 billion dollars in 2005, an amount twice the Chihuahua state government's budget for 2006. Ciudad Juarez generates slightly more than 44 percent of Chihuahua State's gross product, while nationally, the border city contributes for almost 2 percent of Mexico's Gross National Product (Fontera NorteSur 2006).

Enjoying an economic upswing, the current situation of the maquiladora industry is very different from the situation earlier in the decade when massive lay-offs, production shutdowns and plant relocations strongly affected Ciudad Juarez (Frontera

NorteSur 2006). In 2006, an estimated 10,000 maquiladora jobs were available in Ciudad Juarez, a situation which provoked a debate over a possible labor shortage in the industry. One important issue arising in this debate was the question of whether current wages are enough to attract and retain new workers. The initial minimum wage for assembly line workers is about $4.50 per day, though maquiladora industry representatives claim that health benefits, cafeteria allowances, transportation subsidies and work bonuses raise the real daily wage.

Recent evidence indicates that the real cause of Ciudad Juarez 's reported worker shortage might not be the lack of local workers but rather the insufficiency of wages earned by workers in export assembly plants who are unable to meet a family's basic needs on maquiladora wages in a very expensive city. As a matter of fact, the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) and the Center for Economic and Social Information estimate that at least 126,000 people of working age lack formal employment in Ciudad Juarez (Fontera NorteSur 2006). Even if the labor demand is on the rise, working in the informal sector rather than on a factory assembly line seems to be the number one option for an increasing number of people in Juarez.

Many formally unemployed people actually earn a living as street vendors, stop light jugglers, fast food stand operators, domestic workers, yard cleaners, and sex workers. Although they do not receive health or other benefits, workers in the informal sector report earning higher incomes than in the manufacturing sector. According to my interviews with second-hand traders in Ciudad Juárez, not only did their small-business occupations often pay better than maquiladora work, but also allow them to maintain a higher degree of autonomy in their jobs. While no immediate figures were available to

compare informal incomes to factory worker incomes in Ciudad Juarez , a recent national study by the Center of Private Sector Economic Studies (CEESP) found that the average monthly income of informal workers was about $650 dollars (Fontera NorteSur 2006).

Nationally, 28.32 percent of all working age Mexicans labor in the informal sector, according to the CEESP. The research institute estimates that about 12% of Mexico 's Gross National Product is generated in the informal economy. According to a recent study and survey conducted by COLEF (Cervera 2006:79), 15.3% of all 520,000 workers in Ciudad Juárez labored in the informal sector in 2002. Women are the majority of participants in the informal border economy, engaged in a variety of activities, from selling tacos to washing other peoples' clothes. The majority of women (52.5%) working in the informal sector were involved in selling and petty trade, while most men (54%) were working in the service sector (Cervera 2006:79).

Economist César Alfredo Olivas Andrade (UACJ), who co-authored a study on the economic impacts of informal trade in Ciudad Juárez, estimates that annual sales of informal traders amount to US$247 million, that is 5.6% of Juarez's total wage sum (Diario de Juarez, October 31, 2007). The number of street-vendors selling all kinds of contraband and pirated goods in the downtown Juarez shopping district has been rising in the last few years. According to Ciudad Juarez municipal records, the number of registered informal vendors increased from 10,000 at the end of 2005 to 11,583 by the middle of 2006 (Frontera NorteSur 2006).

Street vending and informal cross-border trade have become alternative sources of income and employment for a growing number of people in a city where formal

employment in the maquiladora industry is slowly regaining lost ground. The city's vibrant informal economy is a dynamic sector in which *fayuqueros* or "ant traders" make a profit out of niches that escape state control. The sprawl of informal trade in many parts of Ciudad Juarez and the expansion of the city's underground import economy (*fayuca*) have to do with a set of socio-economic premises characteristic of Mexico's northern border cities.

According to Pelayo and Parra (1994:6) the *fayuca* trade in Ciudad Juárez indicates at the same time a high degree of economic disarticulation of the border region with the rest of the country and a high level of regional economic interdependence with the city of El Paso in the United States. Also, rapid demographic growth through the incessant flow of would-be immigrants to the United States, cyclical falling offs in maquiladora production and employment as well as repeated decreases in real wages caused by the nearly constant devaluations of the peso since1976 and the economic crisis of the early 1980s are other aspects of the border region explaining the expansion of the *fayuca* as a widespread cultural phenomenon of everyday consumption in the Mexican northern borderlands. Over the last decades, this phenomenon has become emblematic of the regional economy and a way to respond to the geographic, economic and social limitations attributable to Chihuahua State's geographic isolation from central Mexico (Pelayo and Parra 1994:7).

The economic proximity of Mexican northern border cities on the United States have encouraged the development of a dynamic system of cross-border recovery in the El Paso–Juarez area in order to cope with the negative impacts of economic recessions and

to compensate for the maquiladora sector income. The United States-Mexico border is one of the few places in the world where an industrialized country shares a common border with a developing country. As Alvarez (1995:451) suggests, "no other border on the world exhibits the inequality of power, economics, and the human conditions as does this one". This vast disparity in levels of economic development between Mexico and the United States has created opportunities on both sides of the border for an intense bidirectional cross-border flow of goods, including recycled materials.

There are various materials that are recovered and transported across the border informally such as cardboard (Medina 2006), discarded appliances and furniture, construction materials, used automobile parts (Hill forthcoming), ferrous scrap, aluminum cans (Medina 1998) etc. This thesis looks for the most part at the recovery of used clothing. It presents an ethnographic overview of the often informal and extralegal mechanisms that support the sourcing, importation and distribution of used clothing from one side of the U.S.-Mexico border to the other. It will shed light on a fascinating transnational network made of various intermediaries centred on a variety of not-so-legal activities surrounding the used clothing cross-border trade from the point of sourcing in the U.S. to the point of retailing and consumption in Mexico.

The present-day market in Ciudad Juárez for recycled and refurbished clothing is vast. Mexican "ant traders" travel on a regular basis to El Paso, Las Cruces, or points further North like Denver to purchase American second-hand clothing. The nextchapter describes an integral part of this dynamic informal recycling system: commercial dealers

in American border towns like El Paso that specialize in selling used clothing in bulk to Mexican cross-border traders.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOURCING OF USED CLOTHING

This chapter focuses on the first stage of cross-border trading including travelling abroad and purchasing second-hand clothing. It follows the journey of Mexican "ant traders" during their cross-border sourcing trips "on the other side" and describes their various options for purchasing second-hand clothing in El Paso which include Goodwill and other thrift stores, flea markets, yard sales, low-end discount stores, and clothing by the pound (*ropa por libra*) stores. This chapter also describes the used clothing industry in American border cities like El Paso. It looks at the cross-border sourcing of used clothing and the sorting process through which a selection is made between the garments that are worthy of being smuggled across the border and those that are not.

Shopping the border

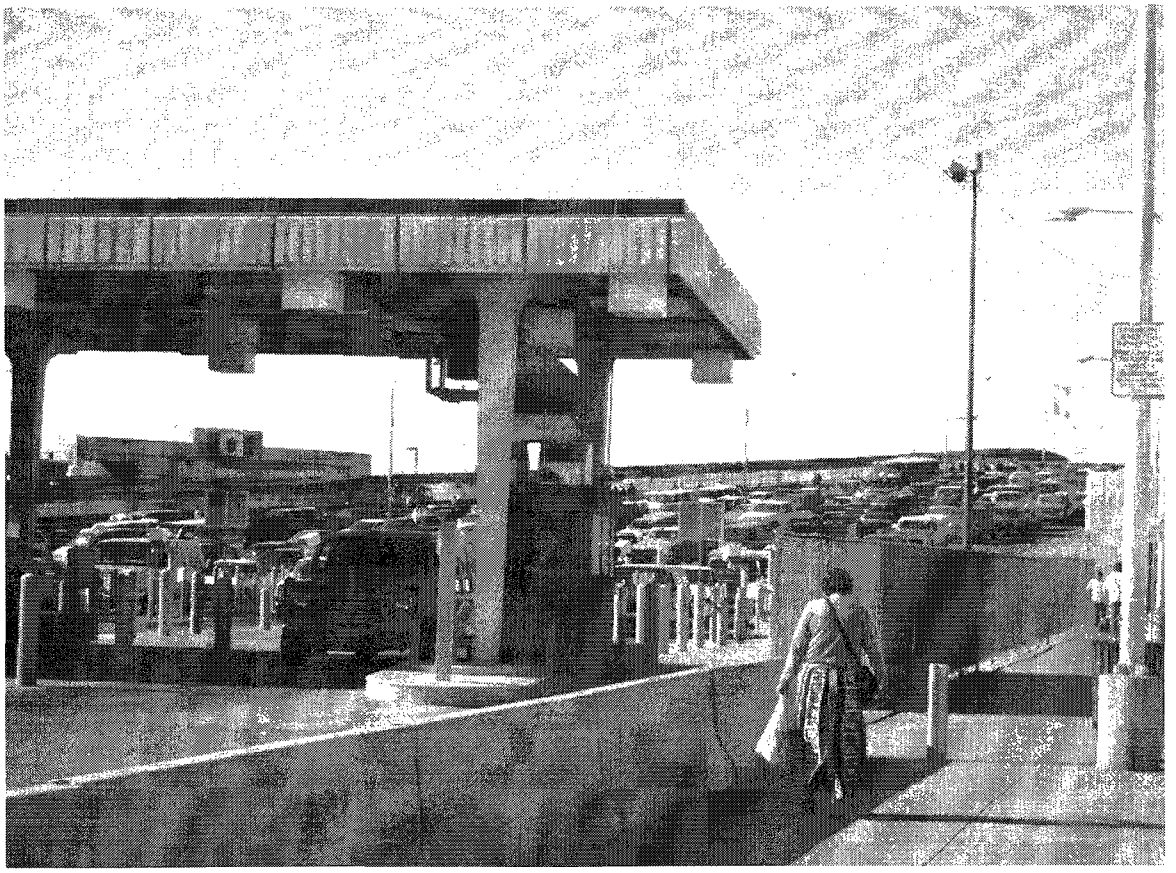
As previously stated, the economy of Ciudad Juárez has been highly influenced by the maquiladora export industry for which El Paso functions as the area's service center. One result of the profound demographic and economic changes brought by the establishment of maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez has been the formation of a dynamic transborder consumer market (see also Curtis 1993:55). In "*Where North Meets South*", Lawrence A. Herzog (1990) refers to the burgeoning consumer markets along the border as one of the leading retail developments in both countries.

As shown in the preceding chapter, the custom of buying what the northern neighbour sells has been around for more than a century in Ciudad Juárez. In the past, Mexico's northern border cities were so poorly supplied in consumer goods by national industry and so closed to the United States that American border cities such as El Paso became havens for Mexican shoppers. As early as 1926, Juarenses annually spent $15 million in El Paso but only $1.56 million at home. In 1995, Mexicans accounted for over one-fourth of El Paso's annual retail trade of $4 billion and up to 90 percent of the retail trade in the downtown area (Ruiz 2000:14).

Due to the strong interrelationships that have linked El Paso and Ciudad Juarez up to now, it is not surprising that retailing is still one of the most important activities in El Paso, and that up to 40 percent of the trade can be attributed to Mexican shoppers (Vila 2000:16). Despite an erosion of purchasing power through peso devaluations and despite Mexican government programs and policy initiatives to reduce such expenditures (Herzog 1990, 146-148), the import-oriented consumer behavior of residents of Ciudad Juárez shows little signs of diminishing.

The downtown commercial areas of both cities are adjacent to each other, and divided only by the Rio Grande. Ciudad Juárez and El Paso are linked by four separate bridges. Walking between the two downtowns takes only a few minutes. Pedestrians cross easily on two bridges. The main vehicle bridge is three kilometers to the east, and another crossing is found 20 kilometers to the east, at Zaragoza. The easiest way for Juarez residents to cross the border is to walk across the downtown bridge into El Paso – the pedestrian line generally moves pretty fast – pass through the Customs hall and wave their border crossing card also known as a "laser visa".

Figure 3: The Sante Fe International Bridge



Photograph by the author

The laser visa allows Mexican nationals to enter the United States for up to thirty days at a time but restricts their mobility to within forty kilometers (twenty-five miles) of the border and legally prohibits their employment in the United States (In Arizona, Mexican citizens can travel within 120 kilometers (seventy-five miles) of the border with their laser visa). Upon crossing, the magnetic strip transmits the individual's photo to authorities to verify their identification. Seven million Laser Visa holders live along the border (*El Paso Times*, March 5, 2004). Laser visas are usually issued to individuals who can meet residency and financial-solvency requirements and who make frequent visits to the United States for different reasons, including business, visiting relatives and friends and shopping.

The main shopping zone for Mexican cross-border pedestrians is the south end of downtown, where the Santa Fe International Bridge ends and becomes El Paso Street. It is home to a large number of "Dollar Stores" (variously named "Family Dollar," "General Dollar," "99¢," "Señor Dollar," etc.) all oriented to the cross-border market. Miguel Angel Castro (2006) describes each dollar store on El Paso Street as unique and idiosyncratic compared to mainstream retail stores. What characterizes this kind of store is that each has its own peculiar, sometimes chaotic yet beautiful, layout. The beauty of it relies on the constantly changing inventories and diversity of products. "Los Chinos", as these shops mostly owned by Korean merchants are locally called, sell a full range of general merchandise including packaged food, vitamins, cosmetics, clothing, thongs, kitchen wares, household items, floral supplies and even cheap goods bearing Mexican icons but which are manufactured in Asia.

Figure 4: Statuette of Juan Diego and the Virgen of Guadalupe

Standing out are statuettes of Juan Diego and the Virgin of Guadalupe, Aztec calendars, national emblems, and caps with sports teams' names like the Guadalajara Chivas. The iconic merchandise is made in China or Vietnam (Frontera Norte, August 7, 2005).

There is a large volume of retail purchases by Mexican nationals, who often buy for subsequent resale. Many stores in downtown El Paso cater to this trade by offering significant discounts (up to 20 percent) for bulk purchases. Newspapers in Ciudad Juárez carry the *Juárez shopper,* replete with commercials from El Paso merchants, a practice typical of the entire border (Ruiz 2000:13). El Paso's downtown commercial street offers an old-fashioned shopping environment and "open air mall" experience to Mexican customers. It is a typically crowded, vibrant place during the day. Sidewalks are often used by store merchants to display their goods. This downtown style of outdoor marketing is clearly geared towards Mexican customers and is meant to transform their cross-border shopping experience into a pleasurable form of recreation.

The main customers of El Paso downtown businesses are low-income Juárez shoppers who cannot afford cars and pick-ups trucks and drive to El Paso's distant malls and new retail chains like Target and Wal-Mart. The concentration of stores in the

southern section of downtown, particularly the streets nearest the Santa Fe International Bridge reflects the restricted spatial mobility of the customers: many Mexicans shoppers walk to the shops closest to the border and must carry the purchases home. A daily parade of Mexican shoppers and small business operators, sometimes called *chiveras*, or goat herds, crosses the Rio Grande to buy low-priced goods in great quantities from downtown merchants.

El Paso's downtown commercial street is also lined with a collection of independent clothing stores and inexpensive retail outlets that cater to Juarenses who walk the few hundred feet from the border port of entry. J.C. Penney anchors this strip. Included are several bridal stores that have great bargains on gowns and accessories of all colors and styles, outlets that sell fabric from the bolt and stores that offer a great variety of cheap Asian shoes.

Undoubtedly, cross-border shopping is responsible for the high proportion of clothing stores in El Paso. Inside Western-style clothing stores, racks of contemporary shirts from the brand-name likes of Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren coexist with racks of Wrangler and Stetson-brand shirts and cowboy hats surrounded by entire families wrestling for styles and bargains. Los Compadres Outlet, a discount clothing business which opened about a year ago in downtown El Paso, buy truckloads of new clothes at greatly prices direct from brand-name companies such as Macy's (*El Paso Times*, July 5, 2008), either because they have minor imperfections or because the whole line of clothing has been discontinued.

The clothing retail market in El Paso is clearly oriented towards the Mexican youth market. El Paso's streets are visited by hordes of young Mexican window-shoppers

who are longing for the fashionable sexy tops and low-rise jeans ubiquitous at youth-oriented clothing stores which dot the commercial landscape. Their window displays are replete with designer knockoffs like polyester blouses with a Lacoste crocodile logo or graffiti style t-shirts and baggy jeans bearing the white rhinoceros logo of the hip-hop-inspired clothing company Ecko Unltd. Most of clothes sold in these stores are new and low-priced items sewn in Asia.

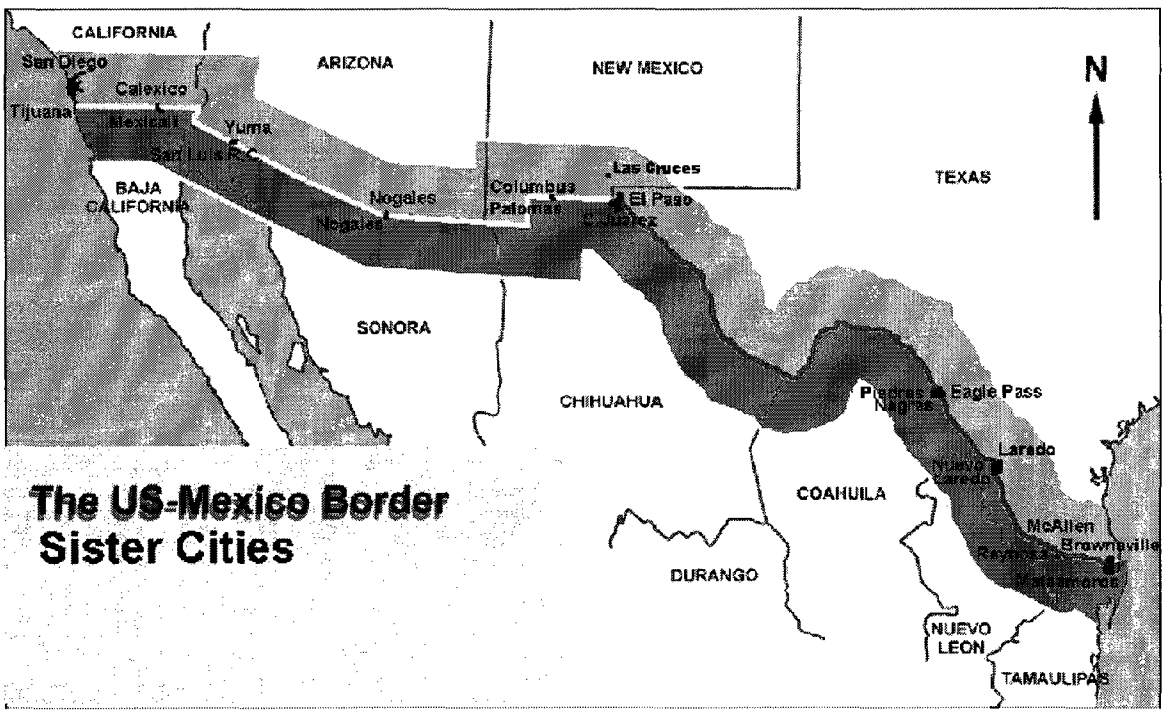
El Paso's clothing market has been flooded with clothing imports from China over the last decade. According to my interviews with secondhand clothing brokers in El Paso, their industry has lost an important share of the local clothing retail market over the last decade in favor of clothing stores that sell new made-in-China clothes to Mexican consumers. Still, options for purchasing used clothing are especially abundant in downtown El Paso and include Goodwill and other thrift stores, flea markets, yard sales and clothing by the pound (*ropa por libra*) stores. Most U.S. border towns like El Paso have firms that specialize in selling discarded clothing in bulk to customers from Mexico and various other countries around the world.

The textile recycling industry along the U.S.-Mexico border

The size of the textile recycling industry in El Paso is relatively small by comparison with other American cities along the Texas-Mexico border. The textile recycling companies center along the eastern region of the border, particularly along the Rio Grande Valley. There are approximately 72 used clothing outlets along the Rio Grande Valley which is strategically situated for both legitimate and illegitimate trade with Mexico (O'Day and Lopez 2001:233).

Brownsville alone is home to nearly two dozen U.S. entrepreneurs who specialize in the *ropa usada* trade (Marling 2006:6). The concentration of used clothing outlets is even higher in McAllen, about five miles north of the Mexican city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, where there is a commercial strip of businesses that together have more square footage than the largest Wal-Mart in the United States (*San Antonio Express-News*, August 22, 2005). The small town of Hidalgo, located across the Rio Grande from Reynosa, also revolves around the used clothes trade (*The Philadelphia Independent,* March 2005).

Map 3: U.S.-Mexico Border with Sister Cities



Source: Pan American Health Organization, U.S. - Mexico Border Field Office

In Laredo, located 150 miles further up the Rio Grande, there are 35 used clothing centers (O'Day and Lopez 2001:233). This city is the major trade gateway between

Mexico and its northern neighbors. Laredo is the closest jumping-off point for trade with the Mexican heart land and enjoys close proximity and good access to Monterrey as well as others centres in Mexico through the Pan-American Highway (*Logistics Quarterly*, Spring 2001).

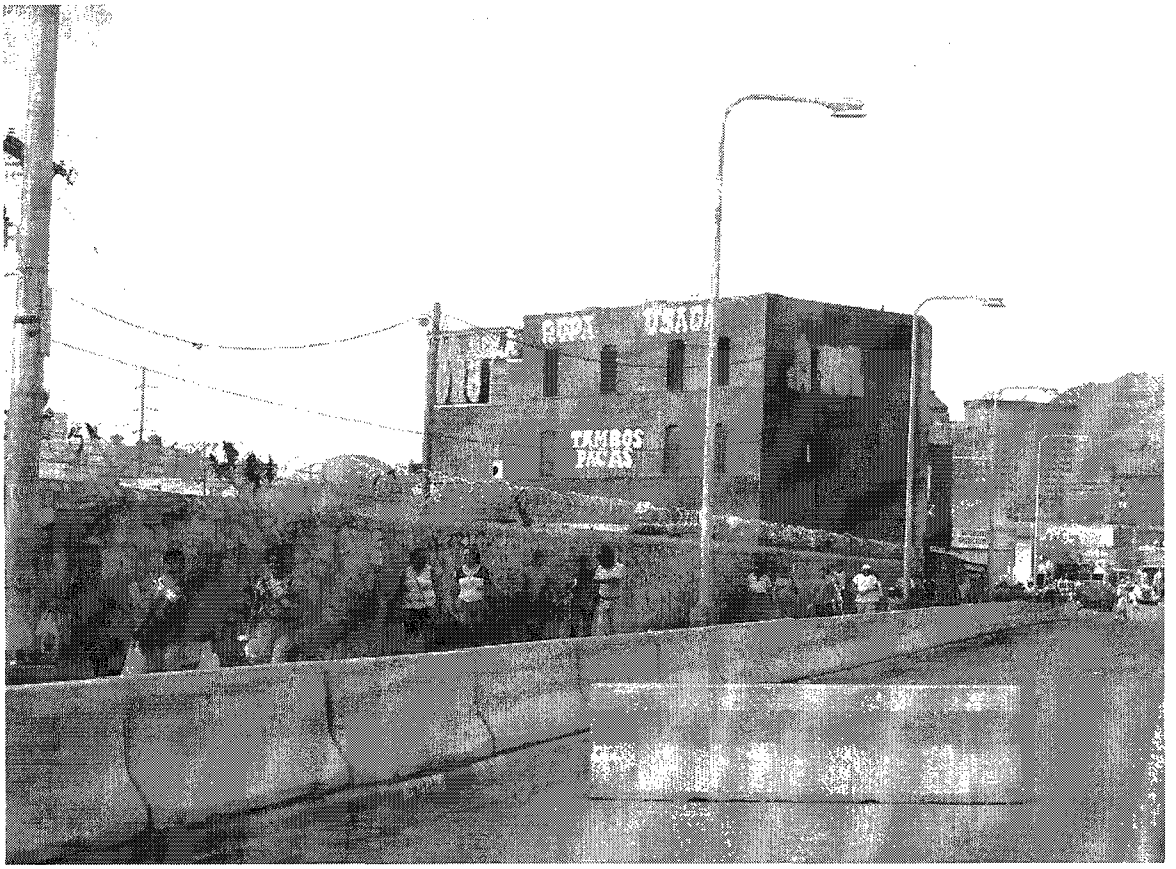
The used clothing industry in El Paso regroups nearly a dozen textile sorting companies also known as "rag graders". Many are enormous warehouses that dominate the local landscape. All the used clothing outlets are located either right at border crossings or as near to them as they can conveniently get. The warehouse shown on the following picture is located on El Paso Street, just a few steps from the Santa Fe Bridge. The old unoccupied building was rented for many years by a lucrative used clothing business called "La Bola de Oro," which means the ball of gold.

This family-owned business started in the used clothing trade in the mid-1960s. It opened a first used clothing warehouse in Laredo and then branched out into the Rio Grande Valley. The company already had warehouses in McAllen, Brownsville and Del Rio, when it reached El Paso in the late 1970s. The family business set up a wholesale operation in this large warehouse strategically located just across the border. The company wanted to attract a large number of customers from the neighbouring Mexican city of Ciudad Juarez, who could easily walk back and forth from one side of the border to the other through the Santa Fe Bridge.

The company came up with the Spanish name "Bola de Oro" because it sold used clothing in bundles that actually looked like balls. Its Mexican customers bought 250-pound bundles at $0.50 to $1.00 per pound, without knowing exactly what was rolled up inside. "Our customers never knew what they were going to get when they bought a

bundle, but there were always things in there that really were gold and ended up being big sellers in Mexico. They called "estrellitas" (little stars), the little shiny things you get to see when you open up the "Bola de Oro" – this brand new shirt or pants or whatever – little sparklers that just catch your eye".

Figure 5: *Ropa usada* warehouse located on the Santa Fe International Bridge linking El Paso to Ciudad Juárez



Photograph by the author

The family-run business continued their expansion by opening several "Ropa por Libra" – which means clothing by the pound – stores in South El Paso. But unlike "La Bola de Oro" where customers bought used clothing in bulk, those who shopped at the

retail stores purchased used clothes that they selected piece by piece at $6.99 a pound. A few years later, the company lost its lease by the bridge and was forced to relocate to another warehouse on Paisano Drive. Although the "Bola de Oro" was now located a few hundred feet from the border, Mexican customers followed the company to its new location.

When the family-own business passed on from the first to the second generation, it was renamed "Casa de Leon" – which means Lion House – and relocated once again just a block away on First Street. The "Casa de Leon" finally changed hands a few years ago when a longtime employee of the inherited firm took over the turnkey business and renamed it "La Fortuna", which means the fortune. Although "La Bola de Oro" has operated in several different downtown locations and under different names over the years, people from Juarez continue to refer to the company by its original name.

Several family-owned businesses like the "Bola de Oro" that have been in the used clothing trade for a long time have closed or have been sold in the past decade. As Jana Hawley (2006:266) correctly points out, the younger generations have opted for careers different from their parents as the competitive nature of the business has increased and profit margins have fallen.

The Chamizal Trading Company, another family-own business mentioned in the previous chapter which has been in existence since 1965, is still operating today despite the fact that it handles a volume of used clothing ten times lower than in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Chamizal has diversified its business in recent years, complementing its used clothing sorting and grading activities with the wholesaling of athletic equipment, uniforms, field equipment, polo shirts, etc. Many other local textile sorting companies

like the Chamizal have seen a significant decrease in their sales of used clothing since the establishment of Mid-West Textile, Co., in El Paso.

Founded in 1982, Mid-West Textile, Co., was originally specialized in the recycling of cotton rags into wiping cloths for use in industry. Over time, the company evolved into one of the largest sorter and grader of secondhand clothing and shoes in North America. The company's 180,000-square-foot facility is "dedicated to extracting value from recycled clothing". The company has about 300 employees who are trained in the art of processing, sorting, and grading clothing in large volume on the basis of quality, style, and fabric.

They sort the clothing into six hundred classifications (categories), some of which are intended for industrial use as rags, some for the "vintage" clothing market, and some for export. The garments meant for export are compressed into 45- to 635-kilogram (100- to 1,400-pound) bales, which are then wrapped in waterproof plastic and bound with metal straps. Mid-West Textile Co. sorts a semi trailer load of post consumer textiles per day (Hawley 2006:268), i.e. about a million pounds of clothing and rags a week. As a result of the large volumes it processes on a daily basis, Mid-West Textile has become one of the largest buyers of used clothing generated by national charity organizations.

As previously stated in Chapter 2, consumers often clean their closet and donate a bag of clothes that are worn, out of fashion, or wrong sized to the Goodwill or Salvation Army. These not-for-profit organizations then sort the clothes, select items for the sales floor of their attached thrift stores, and then dispose of their huge surplus of used clothing at bulk prices to rag graders like Mid-West Textile which in turn export it throughout the world. As indicated by Hawley (2006:266), the price per pound of used clothing is

dependent on current market value but often ranges from three to six cents per pound. Some charity organizations include additional steps before assigning clothes that do not move easily to the bulk heap for commercial resale (Hansen 2000:102).

At the eleven thrift stores operated by Goodwill Industries in El Paso, for example, clothes are color-coded and systematically removed from hangers if they don't sell in four weeks. Many items they receive are deemed inappropriate for resale because they are torn, soiled, damaged or out of style. These rejects, along with items that lingered on the racks too long, usually make a last stop before moving into the salvage market.

Goodwill Industries of El Paso used to have a by-the-pound store located downtown just across the Stanton Bridge called La Semi-Nueva, which sold clothing that did not find a buyer at the thrift stores around the city. La Semi-Nueva brought the charity $1,000 a week, which amounted to about 3 percent of total collections. According to the Goodwill executive director, the organization does not have to ship clothing out to bigger cities for resale. "Other Goodwills have to, but we are lucky to be on the border." (*El Paso Times*, October 10, 1999). Goodwill Industries of El Paso can resell all of its donated clothes locally because of the large demand from Juarez.

The by-the-pound store operated by Goodwill Industries of El Paso has been closed a few years ago. The surplus clothes are now sent to the Goodwill's Donated Goods Division to be auctioned off. The Goodwill's auction is held every Wednesday morning, usually in Spanish. This is because most participants of the auction are Juarez residents. This is evident from the number of cars and mini-vans with Chihuahua license plates that fill the Goodwill's asphalt parking lot located on Alameda Avenue. The

customers who take part in the auction once a week are usually dealers themselves, and sell used goods at the street markets (tianguis) in Ciudad Juárez.

The clothes rejected in early auctions then move into the salvage market. Goodwill Industries of El Paso sells what is left at 7.5 cents a pound to Mid-West Textile Co., who is in charge of removing its container of residual clothing at regularly scheduled times. Goodwill puts the money earned from the clothes' sale back into its job-training programs. As already mentioned in Chapter 2, most other nonprofits organizations do the same. The auction is a way the Goodwill has found to get more value out of the donated clothing before selling the leftovers to the Mid-West Textile for pennies on the pound.

The clothing sold by the Goodwill to Mid-West Textile is called "institutional mixed rags" in the textile recycling industry by contrast with "credential used clothing" which consists of freshly collected and unsorted used clothing that has not gone through the thrift stores first. As Hansen (2000:105) explains, the charitable organizations use several parts of the textile-recycling network. In return for a percentage of earnings, they regularly contract out the right to solicit the donating public directly in their name to commercial dealers who conduct door-to-door collections. Mid-West Textile is willing to pay more money for untouched, "as collected" credential used clothing because no other intermediaries have been through the donated clothing which means that more value can be taken out of it.

Mid-West Textile is also doing business with other textile recycling companies in the United States. One of its main suppliers is Noamex Inc. from Brooklyn, New York, which makes periodic shipments to El Paso, Laredo, McAllen and Brownsville. The company makes $15 to $20 million a year and also collects clothing from various

sources, including charities (*El Paso Times*, October 10, 1999). More than half a million pounds of used clothes are processed weekly at Noamex. The company typically pays between $3,000 and $10,000 for a container with 25 tons of clothes that might yield $14,000 once the truly unusable goods are sifted out and shredded for rags (*New York Times*, December 5, 2000).

Mid-West Textile is a regular buyer of used clothing generated by other locally based companies involved in the textile recycling industry. The company is the biggest player in the local used clothing industry and corners the used clothing export market. Mid-West Textile ships its used textiles throughout the world. The company's main export markets for used clothing are Africa, Central America, South America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Although Mid-West Textile does not directly export to Mexico, the company operates a local distribution centre a few blocks away from the processing plant where Juarenses come to buy used clothes by the pound.

Cross-border sourcing

The distribution centre is located less than a mile from the Paso Del Norte port of entry. Here, mainly Mexicans buy the clothes. It is the main source of supply of many cross-border traders from Ciudad Juárez who considered it as "the best place" to buy used clothing in El Paso because of its variety of choice and wholesale prices. Most people from Juarez who go to the distribution centre regularly call the place "Los Tambos" in reference to the cardboard drums which are used to transport and store second-hand clothing. Picture this space as an area the size of several football fields. Everywhere you look there are clothes from many periods, all seasons, in every permutation of style. The sweltering warehouse is cooled by oversize, cacophonous fans. White light pours down

from skylights. The entrance hall is covered with Spanish lettering offering items like camisas (shirts), pantalones (pants) and chaquetas (jackets). Inside the massive building, people crawl over mounds of clothes dumped across a concrete floor as Spanish-music plays on the radio. On the background, unopened, half-ton bales are stacked to the rafters as if they were bales of hay.

Figure 6: pacas and tambos

Author's Photograph

This area is restricted to the forklift truck operators who drive bundles of clothes from the back of the warehouse to the front. In the center of the space, high-volume buyers are surrounded by thousand-pound bales of clothes that they buy for

approximately $300 apiece. The bales contain only one type of garment and have labels such as Polo Men, Blouse Poly TG, Skirt Denim, Legging, Polo Lady Mix TG, Jean Fashion Bell #2 or Pant Lad Modern TG. Once the bales have been opened, another sorting process begins.

Paty has been doing business with the Mid-West Textile for over twenty years. She spends two days a week at the distribution centre where she purchases and sorts something like a dozen thousand-pound bales of used clothes. Half of the bales are sorted the first day. The remaining bales are put aside until the next time. Paty sources her weekly stock of used clothes in El Paso by investing Mexican capital to buy theses garments and Mexican labour to process them. As a result of the large volume of clothes she processes on a weekly basis, Paty must be able to count on at least four professional sorters or *surtidoras* to assist her in the sorting process which is largely manual and very labour intensive. These women are commuter workers from Juárez who cross the border into El Paso daily to work at the distribution centre for high-volume buyers like Paty.

The *surtidoras* are usually in charge of the initial rough sorting. Their main task is to dig out the clothes from the compressed bale and inspect them in order to separate goods that are torn or stained from the wearable goods. The clothes that are in good condition are put in piles on the floor and those that are discoloured, damaged or outmoded are thrown in the garbage. The *surtidoras* show a very specific savoir faire or ability allowing them to evaluate the condition of a garment almost instantly. They know for example how to spot the visible signs on garments which make them desirable or repelling like designer labels or perspiration marks. They are so used to manipulating

clothes that they are sometimes able to evaluate a garment at the touch of a hand. They are also experts in identifying smells released by second hand clothes and whether these odours are signs of cleanliness such as laundry soap or fabric softener or signs of dirtiness and pollution like sweat or tobacco.

All around them in huge, heaping mounds, are piles upon piles of used clothes that reach up to the sky. They stare at the iridescent piles of fabric, as if hypnotized by their work. As they chat, they keep sorting the clothing at a furious pace. They bend to pick up an item, toss it away, pick up another, toss it away, pick up a polo shirt and put it in a pile on the floor. They rarely look up from the piles, except to watch for the occasional forklift that zooms through the warehouse, pushing clothes up high, sometimes near playing children. The machine clears paths through discarded clothes that are going to be consigned to the dump.

As the process proceeds, the sorting gets more and more refined. Paty is the one who is in charge of the next stage of the sorting process. Her task is to separate the wheat from the chaff. She looks over the clothes disposed in piles by the *surtidoras* one more time and classifies them into different categories according to a range of quality norms. The garments corresponding to the standard of the "number one" category are usually brand-name clothes that have been rarely worn (i.e. only once or twice) or that often come intact, price tags and all. They have a higher resale price and usually end up displayed on hangers or body forms in Juarez market stalls while the clothes matching the "number two" category are sometimes sold directly on the floor at a lower price. Paty sets

aside some of the prettier items to sell in her market stalls and prepare special orders (pedidos) for some of her privileged long-time buyers.

Paty initially began to work as a *surtidora* before starting her own used clothing business. She knows how difficult it is to spend endless hours hunched over a heap of rags. This is why the *surtidoras* working for her deserve to be rewarded for their hard work. Those with several years of experience who are able to sort a large volume of used clothes in a very short time can earn up to twenty dollars a day. Although the work of *surtidora* is a backbreaking job, it does bring some advantages. Good days can result in nice cash bonuses. These take the form of small bundles of bills some previous owner has left folded in a jeans pocket. There is the story of the day a *surtidora* fished out $70 from a pair of Levi's. But most of all, there are clothing benefits. They can easily dress their entire family from the items rejected by their original buyers. The more children or nieces one has, the better the deal becomes. The crew of fashion experts always have in mind their family member's clothing size and unusual body dimensions and always return to Ciudad Juarez with some unexpected treat. In addition, several *surtidoras* collect clothes left behind by other buyers and make extra income by selling them in front of their house on weekends.

The *ropa usada* industry in El Paso used to be a huge business with potentially significant profits but it has dropped off significantly in recent years. According to my interviews with used clothing dealers in El Paso, many of their customers from Juárez, to whom they sell wholesale, have either been forced into the black market or out of business altogether since 2001. Apparently, Mexican customs have confiscated so much

of their customers' clothes that they get scared and do not buy from them anymore. Yet, most of them still have some good loyal customers from Juárez who buy their used clothing and 'somehow' get it into Mexico. The next chapter describes how Mexican *fayuqueros* get used clothing into Mexico.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SMUGGLING OF USED CLOTHING

Sourcing the stock in El Paso is the law-abiding side of the used-clothing trade. The most problematic part of it is the critical moment when the "ant traders" together with their merchandise cross the Mexican ports of entry. A great deal of uncertainty and expense comes with bringing the clothes back to Mexico. This chapter concentrates on the second stage of small-scale cross-border trading i.e. the transport of goods across international borders.

Sneaking used clothing across the Mexican border is a cat-and-mouse game. This chapter explores the "tricks of the trade". It details the tug of war between *fayuca* networks, which are culturally and socio-economically part of the borderland economy, and the structures of state power. It is the border, its institutions for passage and border-crossing strategies that will be the focus of this chapter. It examines how the commercial activities of small-scale cross-border traders can be affected by ever-increasing commodity controls at the Mexican ports of entry.

I will here be concentrating on two types of crossers: *fayuqueras*, or small-scale cross-border traders and *pasadores*, or smuggler/couriers making a living from the so-called *fayuca hormiga* or 'ant trade'. This specific kind of small-scale cross-border trade involves the carrying of small quantities of goods by the same person on several occasions in order to sell them for a profit on the other side of the border (see also Cichocki et al. 2001:56). In other words, it is both characterized by the high frequency of cross-border movements and low volume of product carried per trip.

The work of a *fayuquero* is gender-neutral (Staudt 1998: 75). In Juárez, both women and men buy used goods in El Paso and resell them in Juárez. On both sides, men and women sell used clothing from their homes, from garages, in storefronts, and from stalls at flea markets. However, most of my informants in the *ropa usada* trade were female. The work of *pasador* is usually performed by men. The average *fayuquero* engages in buying for reselling on a full-time basis, six days a week. In contrast, part-time *fayuqueros* are individuals with other occupations such as *maquiladora* workers, who buy used clothing for resale to supplement their income.

The trail of ants

The most routine way of smuggling used clothing in Mexico is the "ant trail". This involves an army of "ant traders" making frequent cross-border sourcing trips in El Paso and carrying small quantities of used clothing over the border, generally either on foot or in the trunk of a car. The *fayuqueras*, or *chiveras* as they are also known, can repeat this process hundreds of times a year, making multiple buying-for-reselling shopping trips in El Paso. As Staudt (1998:78) correctly points out, "The special challenge *fayuqueras* face involves posing as shoppers rather than as traders." Their

traditional strategy consists in taking a small quantity of merchandise on each trip, while claiming that they are goods for personal use.

Their border crossing from north to south is not screened in a systematic way, so "ant traders" more often than not trust their luck trough the Mexican ports of entry. Entrance to Mexico via the international bridges is screened through a red light/green light random system of car and pedestrian inspection that is operated by Mexican customs. On crossing the bridge into Mexico, people can choose to pass by *la Policía Fiscal* (Mexican customs) in the lanes that say, "Nothing to Declare" or, conversely, in the "To Declare" lanes, which are normally deserted. In each of the "Nothing to Declare" lanes, there is a traffic light.

When crossing the border on foot, "ant traders" can be asked to push the button on a solitary "stoplight". The green light means an automatic customs clearance i.e. the pedestrian may proceed through the Customs facilities without inspection. The red light indicates that the person's luggage will be inspected. Some extremely busy border crossings like Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana, with thousands of pedestrians and vehicles crossing back and forth everyday, randomly select people to push the button. Mexican Customs officials can decide who must push the button at their own discretion.

The procedure for those who are driving into Mexico is similar. Upon crossing the border, vehicles activate the Automated Selection Mechanism (stop light). If it flashes green, the driver may proceed without being inspected; if it flashes red, the vehicle will be duly inspected. Apparently, a lot of pressure was brought to bear against this measure by El Paso downtown merchants, so that red lights became fewer and farther between.

The proportion of red lights is said to represent only 5% compared to 95% of green lights, so people pass through relatively easily day after day (*Diario de Juarez*, November 27, 2003). Thus, many "ant traders" who buy used clothing in El Paso are willing to take a chance and risk bringing the contraband back to Ciudad Juarez themselves ("fingers crossed and saying 10 hail marys hoping that I would not be selected for inspection").

They lug their best finds to the international bridge and sneak them across the border in zippered carry bags, backpacks and suitcases. In order to avoid the customs agents' attention on their way back home, they must try to minimize the size of their bags or make more frequent trips. Making two or three trips to cross a couple hundred pounds helps them minimize the risk of loosing their entire stock in the case they get busted. People returning to Juárez by walking over the Santa Fe Bridge who are unable to pass through can also choose to turn back, re-enter the United States and try again via the other bridge.

A trick of the trade that has been used during many years by some Mexican women to smuggle *ropa usada* across the border consisted in doing various consecutive round-trips by foot across the Santa Fe Bridge while wearing several layers of clothing. Another trick that is very popular is catching rides with men who earn their livelihood smuggling used cars known as "*chuecos*" (a Spanish adjective for crooked) into Mexico. These men can buy up to five cars in Texas and drive them across the border every week (*Newsweek International*, August, 1999). They offer people free rides across the border because customs officials are usually less suspicious towards drivers with passengers on

board. The most experienced drivers are apparently able to tailgate the car in front of them in order to sidestep the red light/green light inspection system.

Some Mexican "ant traders" have a vivid imagination. They use fabric softener sheets and their aromatic properties in a very creative way in order to smuggle used clothing across the border. The trick is simple. They fold all the garments and place them in clothes baskets that they transport in the trunk of their car. In the eventuality of being stopped for a car inspection by the Mexican custom officers at the moment of crossing the border on their return home, they can always try to use this stratagem in order to convince the customs authorities that they are actually coming back from doing their laundry in El Paso.

In order to make their scenario as plausible as possible, they take care of inserting fabric softener sheets in between the clothes to mask the smell of mothballed used clothes and give them a scent of freshness which can make the authorities believe that the garments have just been washed. Some drug smugglers use a similar tactic to introduce bricks of marijuana into the United States. They tightly wrap the drug in layers upon layers of cellophane and spread motor oil or dish liquid in between the layers to conceal the odor and avoid detection by customs drug-sniffing dogs. Both strategies are meant to facilitate the passage of contraband goods across national borders by masking their smell.

The mordida system

Although *fayuqueros* use a wide range of methods to by-pass border controls and cross with their goods without paying any duty fees for their importation, they face relatively heavy surveillance. On some occasions, they must pay informally for their used

clothing imports in the form of bribes to the Mexican customs agents. The bribery culture has existed in Mexico for centuries. In Spanish, bribes are referred to as "la mordida" (literally, "the bite"). The mordida system is a deep-rooted, traditional way of getting around and through the system. Paying *mordidas* is often considered as the most efficient—or the only—way of getting things across the border in Mexico. Many traders I have talked to said they have been harassed by Mexican customs agents or Federal Preventive Police officers and have been asked for bribes.

> "Venía de El Paso a pie por el puente Santa Fe y me traje poquita mercancía, en dólares era menos de 100 y me la traje porque ya me la habían pedido y, a pesar de que pasé el semáforo fiscal, me pararon los de la PFP y me dijeron que me iban a quitar la mercancía". "Andele, deme cinco dólares y la dejo pasar, me dijo. Para no tener problemas le dije que sí, le hizo una seña a su compañero que estaba en la patrulla y me dijo que a aquel le entregara el dinero. Así lo hice y me fui".

Some of them talked their way out of the situation, others paid *mordidas* and still others were stalled at the bridge until relatives brought money so they could pass. "Ant routes" are said to stretch all the way into the interior. Thus, a large number of "ant traders" who sell in regional markets and travel south to deliver orders to customers deeper in the interior have to make their way well beyond the international border. Such work involves risks, for at government checkpoints people must negotiate passage or pay for their imports in official and unofficial ways. Those who travel south by bus into the interior of Mexico to sell used clothing must usually pay a set of bribes for their imports, which can range as high as double the worth of the used clothing, at a number of

government checkpoints.

The pasadores

Mexican "ant traders" who do not want to risk crossing with their merchandise on their own can request the services of *pasadores* (couriers) who make a living out of taking used clothing across the border. The *pasadores* gravitate around the most-frequented used clothing outlets in El Paso where they load their mini-vans with used clothing. There are around ten minivans transporting used clothing across the border on a daily basis (*Diario de Juarez*, November 24, 2003). The mini-vans used by the *pasadores* are known as *venaditas* in the argot of the *fayuca*. These vehicles usually have border plates, tinted windows and back seats removed to make room for more clothing. They also have reinforced suspensions so that the mini-vans would not look weighed down. Their cargo of used clothing can weigh as much 500 kilograms (1,000 lbs.).

The amount charged by the *pasadores* varies with the volume of used clothing but it usually ranges between $10 and $15 dollars for a 50 pounds bag of used clothing. The *pasadores* are trustworthy and their services are less expensive than the duty fees that used clothing traders would have to pay to legally import their merchandise.

> "Generalmente traigo mil dólares en mercancía, y me parece que en impuesto tendría que pagar el 19 ó 20 por ciento, como 200 dólares, pero a ellos les pago nomás 20, no se compara, verdad".
>
> "Hace come cuatro días en la pasada me detuvieron y me mandaron a pequeña importación, no siempre declaro pero ahora si tuve que hacerlo. La hacen a uno bajar todo lo que trae y le cobran el 17 o 20 por ciento de impuestos, depende. Si no se crea, muchas veces no le sale a uno" .

Figure 7: *Venaditas* (mini-vans) about to be loaded with *ropa usada* (used clothing) in El Paso for transport across the Mexican border into Ciudad Juárez.

Photograph by the Author

The *pasadores* have arrangements with Mexican Customs officials that allow them to smuggle a large volume of used clothing in their *venaditas* on a daily basis. The Spanish term *arreglo* is used to designate this kind of understanding or arrangement that can be reached between the authorities and the law breaker, in this case a smuggler. Most generally, it involves the transfer of a sum of money from one party to another. The amount of the bribe varies directly with the value of the merchandise and inversely with the amount of social and political influence of the smuggler (O'Day and Lopez 2001:240).

However, the *arreglo* only ensure the passing (*pasada*) of the *pasadores* through the Mexican Customs facilities with their goods. They may face other form of extortion and corruption once they have re-entered Mexican territory.

> "Una vez que llenan la camioneta hacen contacto con los de la Aduana y vigilan que no estén los de la Policía Federal Preventiva, ni de otras corporaciones, ya que ellos están arreglados nada más con los aduanales y de la Policía Fiscal, "se tienen que esconder de esa otra gente".

People who import large volumes of secondhand clothing back to Mexico for resale always run the risk of being stopped by the Federal Preventive Police (*Policia Federal Preventiva*) and having to pay them an extra *mordida*. Paty – introduced in the previous chapter – hires her own driver to transport her weekly cargo of used clothing across the border. His job is to carry out the fourth or five *pasadas* at the wheel of Paty's minivan in direction of the market in downtown Juarez. Prior to each *pasada*, Paty must call her contact from the custom services with her mobile phone. If for some reason she can't reach him, she makes a ride around the international bridges to see if she can locate him. Paty must pay him bribes as high as 600 pesos for each *passada* of used clothing.

Yet paying the bribes to the Mexican customs provides no absolute guarantee of relief. The deal Paty has with the Juarez customs official does not protect her from the federal police officers once in Juarez. They have stopped her driver once and have charged a bribe of 10 000 pesos ($1000) to Paty. Failure to pay the *mordida* would have meant that her entire cargo of used clothing and her minivan would have been confiscated. After what happened with the federals, Paty's contact from the customs advised her to cross with another car, something she disapproved because the minivan

can carry much more. I asked Paty if things would be different if there would no longer be any restriction on used clothing, if her activities would no longer be defined as illegal. She looked at me for a moment and then shook her head.

> "You have to realize, that the fiscal police lives from collecting *mordidas*, it's their main source of income, their salaries aren't enough to live on, this benefits both sides, it's a chain, we have the border close by, this is the value of the border, because here there's nothing else to live on."

If the *arreglo* benefits both the bribers and the recipients of bribery, it can never be taken for granted. Indeed, there are circumstances when the *arreglo* momentarily breaks down. This is often the case when allegations of bribery and corruption involving payoffs to customs agents come out in newspaper reports. The local smuggling scene, allegations of corruption against Mexican customs authorities, as well as law-enforcement operations surrounding the unauthorized entrance of used clothing into Mexico, are the focus of intensive coverage by local newspapers. The media's interest toward the *fayuca* trade can in some cases have important impacts on the economic activities of Mexican ant traders by affecting momentarily their ability to cross the used clothing across the Mexican ports of entry.

A Juarez reporter, for example, went to a popular warehouse of American used clothing in El Paso one day to purchase a 50 pounds bag of used clothing and hired a *pasador* or smuggler to cross her merchandise into Juarez. The *pasador* did not suspect that she was an undercover reporter attempting to describe the methods he used to introduce the used clothing in Juarez. He realized it only a few days later when an article

titled "*Fayuquean 5 toneladas de ropa cada día*" – *"They smuggle 5 tons of used clothing every day"* (*El Diario*, November, 24, 2003) appeared in the local newspaper.

The article exposed revealing details about the transaction between the reporter and the *pasador* in terms of delivery price and potential risks involved in the process. It also reported compromising facts regarding the existence of an *arreglo* between the *pasador* and the Mexican custom authorities for crossing the used clothing into Juarez. In the following weeks, the *pasadores* were given a very hard time by Mexican customs authorities. This incident created a real commotion among the *fayuquero* community. Over and over, one could hear the refrain, "Ya no hay pasada!" (There is no more passing). Or alternatively, "Ya no hay arreglo." (Basically, the fix isn't in). Within no more than a month, however, the public's attention began to focus on other things, and things were back to normal along the border.

The Mexican customs

The economic activities of cross-border traders are supported by a variety of mechanisms including trust within networks and reliance on corrupt officials and institutions (Smart 1988, Heyman and Smart 1999:5). The customs service is generally seen as one of the most corrupt institutions in Mexico. Many people perceive the Mexican customs system process as negotiable, even corrupt, in spite of a massive reorganization in the early 1990s (Staudt 1998:72) and a crackdown on widespread corruption in the early 2000s.

In February 2001, only two months after the administration of President Vicente Fox took office, José Guzmán Montalvo, the new head of Mexico's customs services, had dismissed the directors of 43 of the country's 47 customs inspection offices. The 43

senior-ranking customs officials all were fired for permitting "serious acts of corruption" to be committed by officers under their supervision (*BBC News*, February 2, 2001). According to Guzmán Montalvo, the problem affecting Mexico's customs services was attributable to a lack of supervision and a deeply-ingrained culture of corruption. Since 2001, it is estimated that 80 percent of the professional customs service employees have been replaced, including almost all of the 47 port directors, sometimes several times (*New York Times*, June 5, 2003). In Ciudad Juárez for instance, six successive port directors have been nominated between 2001 and 2008.

At the beginning of 2004, the "brand new" Customs Administrator in Juarez announced the imminent installation of sensors to detect overloaded vehicles and video cameras to register licence plates at the moment of entry in Juarez (*El Diario*, February 2, 2004). The official was very confident that the new system would help in detecting the *fayuca hormiga* of used clothing through the international bridges and put on file the vehicles used by the *pasadores*.

Smugglers caught in this illegal activity can receive steep fines. In addition to the 35% import tax, they can be fined an amount equivalent to 70 to 100% of the value of the used clothing, which can be as much as 20,000 pesos, or US$ 2,000 (*El Paso Times*, October 10, 1999). Their car may also be confiscated until they pay and their used clothing imports are seized

The seizing of second-hand clothes can also be coordinated with the municipal government of Juarez. Municipal public security agents have recently impounded 850 kilograms (about 1,900 lbs.) of used clothing and footwear. The merchandise and the vehicle in which it was transported were then turned over to the Federal Attorney

General's Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*); the amount of evaded import taxes in this specific case was estimated to exceed 25,000 pesos, or US$ 2,500 (*El Diario*, April 25, 2006).

The municipal government of Cd. Juárez is getting increasingly involved in law-enforcement operations directed toward used-clothing *fayuqueros*. The Juárez municipal police have recently installed random checkpoints just a few meters from the international border crossings hoping to catch motorists carrying contraband goods like weapons, used tires and second-hand clothing (*El Diario*, May 4, 2007). Juarez Mayor Héctor Murguía Lardizábal said municipal police checkpoints were part of an agreement between the U.S. and the Mexican governments to maintain security at the border. Representatives of Ciudad Juarez business and human rights groups have questioned the efficiency of forcing people to undergo double inspections and urged the authorities to better coordinate their actions (*El Diario*, May 5, 2007). The checkpoints have also been highly criticized from a human rights perspective.

At the beginning of 2006, Ciudad Juárez Customs announced firm hand against *fayuca* (*El Diario*, 11 January 2006). One month later, 200 traders from various markets (tianguis) of Ciudad Juarez took the streets to protest against harassment, arrests, and stock seized by the Mexican Customs and the Office of the Federal Attorney General (PGR; Procuraduría General de le Republica) (*El Diario*, 21 February 2006). Protesters carried signs saying "Actúen contra la delincuencia organizada, asaltan, roban, levantan, ejecutan y ustedes jodiendo a los comerciantes... Miedosos, aprovechados. Agarren asesinos, no comerciantes". "Act against organized crime, they assault, rob, kidnap,

execute and what do you do? Screwing traders.... cowards.... Arrest murderers, not traders!

Mexican *fayuqueros* do not see themselves as smugglers and criminals. They see themselves as workers or traders and try to avoid the negative connotations often attached to their activities. They think of themselves as honest and hard-working people who have found an economic niche that should not be considered equal to illegal activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering and smuggling. As Van Schendel and Abraham (2005:4) suggested, the "'armpit smugglers' or 'ant traders' who cross borders all over the world with small quantities of goods may together account for huge quantities of contraband but they do not represent global syndicates of organized crime".

The *fayuca* trade of used clothing belongs to the informal sector of the economy which often involves activities required for the livelihood, housing, etc. of large populations, activities identified as having widespread legitimacy, even when illegal (Heyman and Smart 1999:18). As Heyman and Smart (1999:21) suggest, "many illegal-labeled activities have much legitimate life in society (or in particular groups), and under such circumstances the state response can constitute bad law, adding to illegality and persecution". Although importing used clothing into Mexico has evolved into a practice that is categorized as "illegal" by the state, this cross-border trade enjoys widespread "social legitimacy" in borderland communities due to its local economic importance to the survival of Mexican border consumers.

According to one of the former administrator of the customs facilities in Juárez, the only way to avoid smuggling would be to allow the import of used clothing:

"Anyway, they are going to cross it, the necessity is too important because people need to purchase inexpensive clothing" (*El Diario*, November 24, 2003). A fellow administrator of Border Customs at an international bridge in Reynosa sees things the same way: "When there is demand, it will cross" (*San Antonio Express News*, August 22, 2005). The border official recognized that there is a need for the clothes because many families live on less than $75 a week. Regardless, he insists on the fact that people have to respect the laws. According to him, *ropa usada* is one of the leading contraband products they seize. The situation can be compared to drugs going north.

Despite all the anti-corruption efforts to eradicate smuggling (seizures of contraband increased fivefold from 2000 to 2002), however, contraband continues to cross the borders. While it might be more difficult to bribe an inspector to look the other way or to use rustic roads called *brechas* to get around the permanent inspection stations, larger smuggling operations are resorting to more elaborate schemes using falsified documents and phantom companies (*New York Times*, June 5, 2003).

Documented smuggling

In addition to used clothing entering Mexico through the *fayuca* trade, there are also cases of "documented smuggling", in other words, the entry of goods under a false declaration of origin in order to benefit from preferential tariffs, under-invoicing or incorrect tariff classification so as to evade payment of tariffs or anti-dumping or countervailing duties. The National Chamber of the Clothing Industry (Canainves) recently denounced the fact that importers were now passing off wearable used clothes as "mutilated rags" to customs officials at the Mexican ports of entry, thereby avoiding the need for impossible-to-obtain licenses and high tariffs.

Data provided by the Ministry of the Economy (*Secretaría de Economía*) indicate a net increase in imports of mutilated rags over the last years. Between 2003 and 2004, the volume of imported mutilated rags increased from 6,500 tons to 15,400 tons, an amount that reached 17,500 tons in 2005 (*Reforma*, January 6, 2006). Mexico Customs Administrator General acknowledged the possibility that some companies might use inappropriate tariff classification to disguise the importation of used clothing as "mutilated rags". In this case, the investigation gets more complicated because it is difficult to inspect all freight trucks crossing the border to check if they are really carrying old rags.

The illegal entry of used clothing as documented contraband is controlled by organizations such as shipping firms that ship large volumes (e.g., sixty-five-foot tractor trailer) of secondhand clothing into the interior of Mexico. High volume used clothing buyers sometimes hire shipping firms who offered the rates of 22 cents a pound to Reynosa, 50 cents to Monterrey, 60 cents to San Luis Potosi, 64 cents to Mexico City and beyond. A man who answered the phone to a journalist who called a shipping business advertised at a *ropa usada* warehouse in McAllen said there is a 100-pound minimum to transport "The maximum is as much as you want —— 2,000, 3,000, 4,000, 5,000 pounds," he said. "Will you have problems at the bridge?" asked the journalist. "Nothing, nothing, no problems. Everything is safe. Everything is safe. When we go, we are already fixed up," he said. "How, if it's illegal?" asked the journalist. "Well, who knows about the bosses, but everything is safe. It all gets there," he said (*San Antonio Express-News*, August 22, 2005).

There are several ways of introducing used clothing in Mexico for resale ranging from small-time smuggling conducted by regular inhabitants of the area who make frequent trips to the United States and carry used clothing over the border little by little in a car trunk or a suitcase to large-scale smuggling operations who specialized in "documented contraband". It is worth mentioning that used clothing sent to Mexico is not always intended to be commercialized.

Cross-border courier services

Mexicans immigrants across the United States use cross-border courier services -- some who bypass strict Mexican customs laws with payoffs to border officials and some who properly declare their contents -- to send goods to family and friends in Mexico (*The Chapel Hill News*, May 18, 2005). All those packages headed south are part of a small, hard-to-track segment of what economists call remittances -- money and goods that people abroad send to their homelands. Many of the goods sent south by the van services users are cheaper in the United States and of better quality than what might be available in their homelands.

A woman who has been using the courier services for several years regularly sends boxes filled with used clothing and shoes to her relatives and neighbors in Guanajuato, a central Mexican state home to many Mexican immigrants like herself. The woman who is living in North Carolina frequently trolls yard sales and thrift shops to find clothes for her nieces, nephews and aunts in Mexico. At American thrift shops, she can buy a good pair of pants for $3. According to her, even after paying a courier $60 or $80 to ship the goods, it's still cheaper than buying the same amount of clothes in Mexico.

Sending packages can be risky, however. The service is expensive and far from guaranteed. Crossing the bridge into Mexico is just the beginning. Numerous government checkpoints increase the red tape. Boxes can be searched there, too. Items are often lost or stolen after they cross the border. But according to Mexican immigrants, these *paqueterias*, or courier services, are cheaper, less risky and faster than traditional package companies such as UPS or its Mexican equivalent, Estafeta.

This chapter has followed the complex routes through which used clothing travel into Mexico and illustrated how value is created from used clothing through its effective border crossing. It has provided an ethnographic overview of people who make a living from the so-called *fayuca hormiga* or 'ant trade'. The army of "ant traders" -- along with larger smuggling operations -- are feeding the market for used clothing in Ciudad Juárez which represents a dynamic sector of employment and a major source of provisioning for Mexican border consumers. The following chapter will turn to the used clothing retail scene.

CHAPTER SIX

THE USED CLOTHING RETAIL SCENE

Although used clothing is a restricted import in Mexico and thus imported illegally across the border, it is "legally" sold along Juarez curbs and street markets. This chapter focuses on the third stage of cross-border small-scale trading which covers the informal marketing and selling of second-hand clothes. The economic geography of used clothing retailing in Ciudad Juárez contains several distinct but interconnected segments that I describe in this chapter. I focus on the participants in the trade and their sale practices as well as the many acts of clothing refurbishment they perform on second-hand clothes before putting them on display in the markets stalls.

I also discuss issues regarding vending regulations and analyse the role of market leaders and popular organizations like the Popular Defense Committee as political and economic intermediaries between the city and second-hand traders. In the last section of this chapter, I follow the flow of second-hand clothing from the retail scene into the local clothing universe of the Northern Mexican borderlands, examining brand name clothing and other youthful fashions such as the "Pachuco" and "Cholo" dress styles.

The Used Clothing Retail Scene

The used clothing retail scene represents an important sector of employment in Ciudad Juárez. Some used clothing vendors sell their merchandise directly in front of their house or in the streets while others manage to get a stall at one of the numerous Juarez markets. The Direction of Municipal Commerce (*Direccion de Comercio Municipa*l) of the City of Juarez estimates the number of registered popular markets to 226 with some 6500 traders of which four in ten sell secondhand goods (*Diario de Juarez*, June 18, 2007). The majority of the city's 2600 secondhand traders or *segunderos* sell clothing and appliances.

All northern Mexican border cities are dotted with urban markets dedicated to used goods that are called "las segundas". This expression is commonly used to designate the second-hand market. However, many people working in "las segundas" are not selling anything used. As Sarah Hill (2009) explains, this expression now refers to markets that might sell used goods, or might sell cheap Asian imported "fayuca," or both. According to the author, Juarenses see no contradiction in the fact that some markets referred to as "las segundas," display little that is second-hand.

Hill argues that the status of the goods as new or second-hand is a distinction of little importance to Juarenses. "To Juarenses, it does not really matter because "las segundas" has always clearly indicated that what these markets provide for them is access to goods from elsewhere. Whether used or new, the market sells imports and a shopping experience of a particular kind: bargaining, haggling based on the purported secondary or second-hand quality of the merchandize under consideration" (Hill 2009). According to

the author, Juarenses attach more importance to the foreign origin of goods and the nature of consumption in "las segundas".

At the same time however, there remain some clear and well-known distinctions that Juarenses recognize in the array of "segundas" around the city. Hill gives the example of the market known as "los cerrajeros" in downtown Juárez which is still largely dedicated to used merchandise. As already mentioned in Chapter 3, it is the city's oldest second-hand market. Nowadays, the market regroups about 500 vendors and is visited daily by thousands of consumers from Juárez and other parts of Mexico (*Diario de Juárez*, August 15, 2005). There are several other "segundas" in downtown Juárez. A few blocks away from the plaza is the "segundas" area. This part of downtown Juarez is probably the liveliest area of *El Centro* next to the plaza and is typical of most Mexican border cities (Arreola and Curtis 1993).

The creation of these "segundas" dates back to the early 1990s and was the result of former Panista Municipal President Francisco Villareal's efforts to relocate downtown street vendors into outlying markets (Staudt 1996:44). This epoch when some 400-600 downtown street vendors moved to three public markets is still vividly remembered by some vendors. "Antes estábamos en la Velarde, pero cuando entro Francisco Villarreal, nos echaron por acá, fue cuando quiso desocupar a las calles, hizo limpia y nos pusieron aquí, pero es la misma, la gente lo sigue a uno".

The "segundas" area contains several hundreds semi-permanent and permanent stalls opened seven days a week that specialize in used clothing, catering to the local population. This is where I spent most of my fieldwork time observing, listening, asking, participating and networking with secondhand traders. This downtown area is a major

commercial hub for secondhand traders selling in street markets or "tianguis" that have spread in Ciudad Juarez's colonias over the last decades. Thus, it was the perfect milieu to interact and engage in informal communication with them in order to get access to other observation settings like the tianguis located most of the time in hard to find areas of the city.

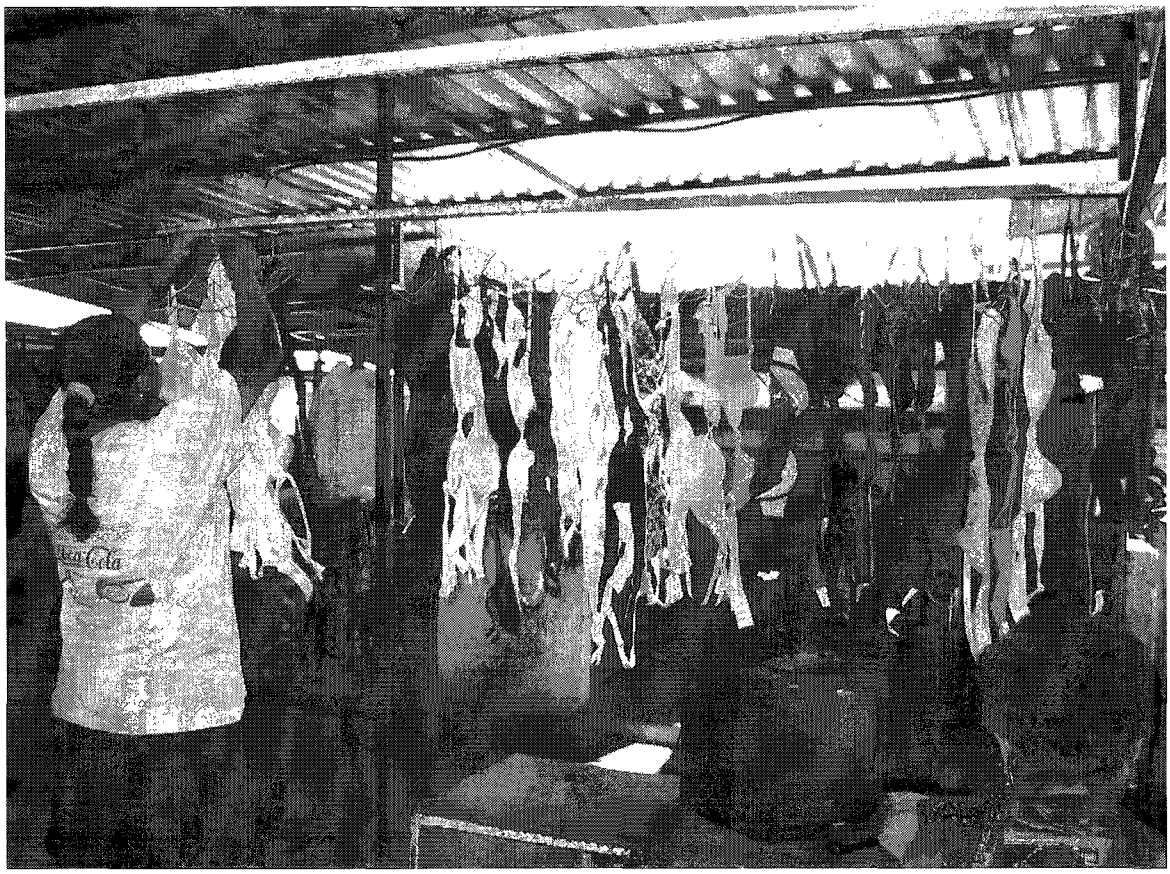
The word "tianguis" comes from the náhuatl *tianguixtli* which means "the market place". Traditionally, the word has been used to describe open-air markets set up on an impromptu basis by indigenous people who would come down from the mountains and other remote areas of Mexico. Over time, the use of the word has expanded to include street markets that spring up magically in Mexican urban neighborhoods one day of the week. The *tianguistas* are mobile vendors who always follow the same weekly itinerary that takes them to several colonias in the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez where bundles of metal joists are momentarily converted into a maze of temporary stands. The *tianguistas* near the border either work as *fayuqueros* on the side or else buy heavily from them (O'Day and Lopez 2001:240). The "ants" – along with larger smuggling operations – are feeding the city's ever-expanding networks of used clothing traders who prefer to rely on local sources of supply, either because they can not cross the border into El Paso or simply because the weekly volume of used clothing they handle is too small. *Fayuca* is an absolute necessity to many people who operate stalls in established markets and *tianguis*.

The "Segundas"

A broken air conditioner blow hot air onto a colorful mountain of clothes as people dig into the mounds of old blouses, pants and random T-shirts, searching for items

to sell in their rickety booths. Most of the clothes are stacked right on the ground, with the nicer items selected from the warehouse —all small, delicate things— hanging on body forms. There are fashionable sexy tops, skinny jeans made of thin, stretchable denim, low-waist sweatpants characteristic of the "J.Lo generation" and a beautiful selection of bras (which typically sell at a higher price per pound than other clothes) in all sorts of colors, styles and sizes.

Figure 8: Hanging underwear



Photograph by the Author

The market stall is owned by Paty who sits limply on a plastic chair while watching a *telenovela* on her old Panasonic television – from segundas. The space

occupied by Paty is the size of eight individual stalls. The established market, where a few hundred traders have a stable place from which to sell secondhand clothing, is officially called the Mercado Oscar Flores. It used to be a public market with spots rented from the municipal government but the vendors became the owners of their stalls a few years ago. The private market is opened seven days a week although the vast majority of standholders only work Saturdays and Sundays.

Figure 9: Mercado Oscar Flores

Photograph by the Author

Paty has assistants and relatives supervise the retail activity while she is in El Paso. Her helpers iron and display all the clothes of the "number one" category on

hangers, adding value to each garment. The higher quality and "authenticity" of the brand-name clothes belonging to the "number one" category enable her to sell them as fashionable American garments initially priced at three dollars during their first week on display and two dollars the following week. Paty's sister-in-law, who sets up a stand in a *tianguis*, comes at the market once a week to get the unsold used clothes that have been displayed on hangers for too long. Paty's business profits from brisk turnover of cheaply obtained U.S. used clothing.

Some clothes still bare red Goodwill Industries tags that are left in place on purpose. Some vendors show the paper thrift store labels to shoppers in order to tempt them. "It's a store in El Paso" they like to say. If the foreign origin of the garment adds value to it, the brand attached to it also contributes to boosting its value. The brand-name etiquettes still attached to some garments are never removed in order to keep every trace of their foreign origin intact, which appear to be very meaningful to their marketing.

Brands provide a means of distinguishing traders and their stalls: the possession of a brand-name label is a key selling point, a way of gaining a competitive advantage over other traders. Some stallholders proudly point out that label as evidence of authenticity. Paty could easily sell an imported second-hand branded pair of jeans, e.g. Polo, Tommy, Levi's, for between four and eight dollars only by drawing the shopper's attention to the fact that "they are originals" or "they are Americans". The most common marketing strategy is to de-emphasize the second-hand nature of the clothes while displaying their American origin as much as possible. Second hand clothes are usually subjected to various acts of clothing refurbishment before being put on display in the markets stalls. Used clothing traders, who are mostly women, engage in routine washing

and ironing – literally to divest garments of traces of their former owner, and to attempt to rekindle something of their original value.

Several street-vendors come to Paty's market stalls every day to pick-up and buy around twenty polo shirts that they resell in different places around the city like in front of the American Consulate for instance. Paty often let them get their everyday stock of polo shirts and pay for the merchandise only once it was sold. The street-vendors add value to each polo shirt by making an attractive packaging in which it is presented for resale. Each polo shirt is folded and wrapped in a plastic bag which is sealed with a burning candle to make it look like a brand-new polo shirt.

The plastic wrap in which the polo short is displayed contributes to give it the appearance of a garment which came out directly from the manufacturer. Thus the fact that the street vendor have just made the packaging himself has to remain secret. This explains why street vendors tend to remain vague when their clients ask questions about the precise origin of the merchandise. They usually pretend that the polo shirts come directly from the United States in a plastic bag. In this case, street vendors are able to de-emphasize the second-hand nature of the polo shirt through the package without having to wash it in the first place.

Figure 10: packaging

Photograph by the Author

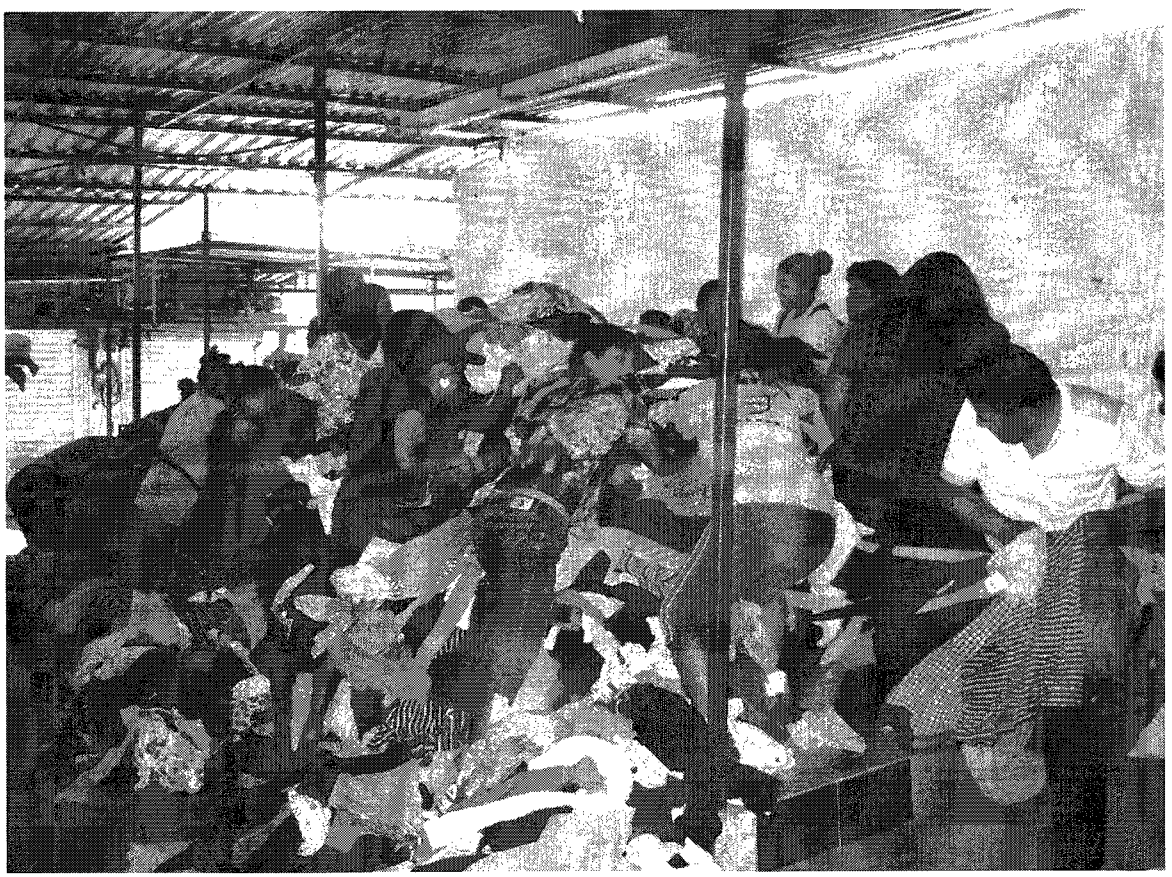
The "Opening Day"

The "opening day", which takes place every Tueday morning around 8:00 a clock, is the moment for Paty to sell back her used clothing imports to her regular customers who come with a view to buy in order to resell. The sales event also attracts first-time buyers coming from Juarez and others places in Mexico. The place is abuzz with activity. Radio music and cries by vendors, *"¿Qué va a llevar?"* (What will you take?), increase the noise level. When a new arrival is uncovered for resale, the opening is much like the hustle and bustle of holiday shopping. The concern with newness and choice is

perceptible around the crowd of customers fighting for the best items and selecting particular items to resell.

Buying-for -reselling occurs in at least two ways. To begin with, the all new merchandise brought by Paty from the warehouse is hidden from view under a blue plastic tarp. The regular buyers gather around the heaping mound of used clothes - always in the same place – for the great unveiling. When Paty gives the go signal, the participants suddenly jump into the central mountain of clothes pulling on everything they can snatch. The more garments they grab, the better choice they get.

Figure 11: The opening day



Photograph by the Author

The scene is repeated twice starting with the blue jeans – largely Levi's but there were tags from Wrangler, Jordache, and Gitano as well – that sell for 1.25 (13 pesos) and following with all the basic items that are priced below one dollar (10 pesos). Buying for the purpose of reselling is also done "on order". A small number of long-time buyers receive a special order of "number one" clothes that Paty set aside specially for them in El Paso. Claudia, who sells used clothing in front of her house on weekends, is one of them.

Figure 12: A home-based business in Ciudad Juárez selling *ropa usada* (used clothing)

Photograph by the Author

Claudia has taken part in the "opening day" for many years and usually brings home about a hundred pieces every week. "Yo vengo cada semana, los martes, aquí dan la pieza a 10 pesos, pero yo la vendo máximo a 25. Si sale buena la ropa, cuando sale la buena marca, una Polo, Tommy o Fila, esa la puedo llegar a vender en 30 o 40 pesos". Claudia is also one of Paty's best friends. When her sales are not good, she can always ask Paty to help her. One day, Paty brought her a colourful selection of Tommy Hilfiger tops for which she found a ready sale the following Saturday morning. Claudia had washed, ironed and hanged the clothes on body forms for her window display.

Figure 13: Window display of Tommy Hilfiger secondhand jeans and tops for sale in Ciudad Juárez.

Photograph by the Author

They cost the same price as usual, i.e. a little more than one dollar (12 pesos), but they sold for three dollars, a few extra dollars more because of their Tommy label.

Home-based businesses selling used clothing dot the Juárez landscape. According to my interviews with people who set up stands outside their houses, most were licensed with the municipal government and few reported problems with the authorities. Although Claudia had a vending permit issued by the Direction of Municipal Commerce (*Direccion de Comercio Municipa*l), she once received a fifty dollars fine for encroaching upon the street.

The "Tianguis"

One day at the Mercado Oscar Flores, I met Rosa who was a tianguista. She had a different colonia to visit every day of the week: Monday, Francisco Sarabia; Wednesday, Navarro; Thursday, Arroyo de la Víboras; Friday, Fronteriza Alta; Saturday Sunday, Fronteriza Baja. Tuesday is Rosa's only day off. Most of the time, she's gone shopping in El Paso. A few days after I met her, Rosa was busy tending her clothing stand in a tianguis that pops up around a dusty field in an unpaved colonia every Monday and Friday. The soccer field that anchors the tianguis is filled with piles of brush mixed with trash, and the swamp onto which the market has expanded is a de facto garbage dump. The plastic roofs of the *tianguis* begin to appear at their roving destination around 7:00 am. The sound systems are cranked up and the local instant Walmart is open for business.

People sometimes jokingly referred to the tianguis as "el Wal-Mart," or, more ambitiously, "el mall," and as I browsed through the booths, I came to understand why. There were stalls filled with children's clothes, stalls with shoes, stalls with jeans. There were, too, polo-shirts embroidered with corporate golf tournaments logos for ten pesos

each, tables piled with underwear, carts stocked with pineapple and melon and lemon "aguas," taco stands. There was, above all, lots of color. For some, a trip to the *tianguis* is an outing, a thing to do, a sort of window-shopping. This was a place to sit and leisurely eat tacos, to be seen, to reconnect with friends. The first time I visited Rosa, it took me a while to found her booth. Rosa was hidden under a loosely tied plastic tarp that sheltered her from the sun and the blowing dust of the dry spring season. Some of her clothes were stacked in neat piles on a long wooden table, with the prettiest things hanging from the roof of the moveable booth neatly displayed on metal hooks.

Figure 14: stand in a tianguis, Ciudad Juárez

Photograph by the Author

Rosa sat behind the table also filled with dusty plastic toys, dangling her feet, smiling halfheartedly. She paid around twenty pesos a day to set up shop in the tianguis. Some days Rosa made barely enough to cover the rent for her stall. At times, her daily profit could surpass the weekly minimum wage she earned as a maquiladora worker. Rosa started working as a production operator on a factory assembly line in 1971. At that time, she earned less than twenty dollars a week. Twenty something years later, Rosa ended up earning a little more than thirty dollars.

After losing her job when the export assembly plant closed back in 1993, Rosa decided to use her severance pay of a thousand dollars (10 000 pesos) as start-up capital to launch a used clothing business. She viewed vending as more lucrative than maquila work. Besides, she said, it takes less time and you can "be your own boss". I have met several other vendors who claimed that informal cross-border trade offered several benefits over maquiladora work. "yo no podría trabajar en una maquila, si no lo hice de joven, mucho menos ahora y luego con un sueldo de 400 pesos, ni loca." As already indicated in Chapter three, working in the informal sector instead of on a factory assembly line seems to be what a significant number of people prefer to do for a living in Ciudad Juarez. That does not mean that traders are not formalized in some way in terms of compliance with regulations. As mentioned earlier, a large number of vendors are licensed with the municipality and thereby legally authorized to practice their commercial activities.

The Regulation of Municipal Commerce

The Direction of Municipal Commerce (*Direccion de Comercio Municipal*) of the City of Juarez issues vending permits to individuals and organizations to sell on streets,

in semifixed and fixed locations. These vending permits allow the sale of brand-new and second-hand goods, contraband or not. Permit fees range according to the number of days per week that vendors usually work at a specific site. According to information provided by the Direction of Municipal Commerce, the cost of a vending licence valid seven days a week was of approximately 165 dollars in 2005. But fees can change from one municipal administration to the next and range according to official decisions and negotiations with individuals and their market leaders who usually play an active role in securing vending permits on behalf of vendors.

In vendors' eyes, both the municipal president and the politically appointed director of municipal commerce are key figures with whom accountability rests for the number of permits granted, their cost, and the burden of enforcement. What makes Juárez special, in contrast to Mexican cities in the heartland is the alteration between dominant and conservative opposition party control of municipal government and, correspondingly, the clout of popular organizations more or less affiliated with the parties that negotiate with authorities over vending.

Municipal control over licensing also generates political revenue through partisan-affiliated organizations that ostensibly serve vendors. Vendors often organize themselves in associations, which become the collective actors that intermediate the relations between them, the state and politicians. Some markets in Juárez are under the leadership of the Popular Defense Committee, or the *Comité de Defensa Popular* (CDP), the city's largest popular organization (Staudt 1996:448). This organization, one of the most important of several popular organizations that operate in Northern Mexico, is well known in Ciudad Juárez for providing protection for informal cross-border traders and

fayucà trade (Staudt 1998:191). The CDP clientele in Juarez includes a large number of segunderos - secondhand traders (Lau 1991, 47).

As Staudt (1998:50) explained, "Under CDP leadership, settlers 'invaded' publicly and privately owned land to create new *colonias.* CDP leaders maintain a dense, top-down organization reinforced with weekly meetings". During the 1980s, some CDP leaders were actively involved in the development of an underground structure for the importation and freight transport of foreign goods throughout the state of Chihuahua. The CDP remains a powerful actor in the informal economy of Juarez and continues to play an active role as a mediator between the state and Mexican *fayuqueros.*

Street-vending and market commerce are common income-generating activities in Juárez, both in contemporary and historical times. No official counts are available of vendor growth, but newspapers frequently publish articles with complaints from established commercial organizations that such growth is a problem in need of control. Relations between vendors and authorities resemble a standoff, with vendors amassing more space and authorities moving between control and tolerance.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the municipality of Juarez has been playing a more active role in law-enforcement operations directed toward used-clothing *fayuqueros* in recent years. The former municipal administration of Mayor Héctor Murguía Lardizábal has resorted to drastic measures like forcing people to undergo double inspections through the installation of municipal police checkpoints just a few meters from the international border crossings (*El Diario*, May 4, 2007).

The city administration has adopted a similar line of conduct with regard to the regulation of municipal commerce. In spite of all its efforts, the number of inspectors

from the Municipal Commerce Office devoted to the mission of enforcing vending regulations is ridiculously low considering the number of street markets dispersed across the city's *colonias*. The number of street markets has been growing at a very fast pace in emerging colonias of the eastern and western parts of the city in recent years. In 2003, the Direction of Municipal Commerce reported the apparition of a new tianguis every month and the creation of fifteen of them that same year. From the municipality's point of view, the main problem with tianguis is that they are located on the streets and can become a source of trouble for the residents in these neighborhoods. In 2003, the Direction of Municipal Commerce dismantled an average of 350 irregular businesses every week, i.e. nearly 1400 each month (*Diario de Juarez*, September 26, 2003). In 2004, the Direction of Municipal Commerce suspended the granting of vending permits in an effort to curb street markets expansion (*Diario de Juarez*, April 27, 2004).

Still, inspectors roam the streets daily collecting fees, checking permits and confiscating goods for the supposed repeat offenders (Staudt 1996:449). The vast majority of segundas merchants have experienced some form of harassment by local authorities. Several vendor crackdowns have occurred over the years at the Mercado Oscar Flores (*Diario de Juárez*, November 14, 2004). One in particular is often recalled by the vendors. That day, Federal Preventive Police officers burst into the Mercado Oscar Flores taking everybody by surprise "I remember that time when the PFP came, they asked me 500 $ (5000 pesos), but I only gave them half of it, about 250 $ (2500 pesos), but other people gave them much more". According to my interviews with stand owners, this was not the first time that the police authorities threatened them to take away their "bread and butter". They think of themselves as honest and hard-working people that are

trying to make money to buy food and improve their children's life in a trade that continues to operate outside the law but should not be considered illegal. Moreover, they offer convenient clothes in quantities and at prices the poor can afford. "If there were no segundas, the poor would be left naked and barefoot." "The government refuses to acknowledge that many families are dressed because of the segundas".

As a matter of fact, the segundas and their worn castoffs are a lifesaver for the huge numbers of poor migrants who resettle in the growing colonias of cities like Ciudad Juárez. To be sure, second-hand clothes from the U.S. often represent the only source of affordable clothing for many of them. However, the local popularity of this imported commodity among low-income consumers can hardly be understood only in terms of price factor. Above all that, "the segundas are the boutique of the poor" as José Manuel Valenzuela, a leading scholars of the U.S.-Mexico border, put it (*Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2007). They make a profusion of clothing available from which fashion consumers who differ by class, generation, and gender can purchase and wear just the garments they want.

Secondhand clothing consumption and dress practices in the northern Mexican borderlands

The segundas are a mecca for buyers of all social classes. There are the low-income buyers like Socorro whose husband supports her and three children as a factory worker at a plant that makes air bags for U.S. cars. As Socorro correctly pointed out to me, "people who earn 300 pesos a week are not going to pay for rent, electricity and food for their family, and then go out and buy a 300-peso American sweater. Even those of us

with economic hardships can buy a *quinceañera*[5] dress, for a tenth of the price we would pay in a store". They mingle with the decidedly middle-class Martha, 16, who strolled in the segundas with three friends. With their bell-bottoms, knit tops and clunky platforms, they epitomized segunda chic. Martha bought a trendy and new-looking DKNY shirt for three dollars, musing: "People must get tired of things quickly in the United States."

Second-hand garments with well-known designer labels such as Nike, Levi's and Tommy Hilfiger are always highly sought after by fashion-conscious consumers like Martha. Most low and middle income Mexican border consumers cannot afford to purchase new brand-name clothes in the United States and rely instead on the local market of smuggled second-hand, name-brand clothes that are marketed as fashionable American garments and can be purchased at lower prices than branded copies made in China, or Mexican produced garments. Most customers consider that these second-hand brand-named products embody "quality" in contradistinction to synthetic Chinese clothes.

Many Mexican border consumers wear popular American styles and name brand labels that have been spotlighted by the media. It is common to see young people wearing designer labels such as Polo Sport, Tommy Hilfiger, and Nautica as well as popular sports and leisure logos such as Nike and Adidas. Many of the men often wear baseball caps and clothing monogrammed with NFL, NHL and NBA insignia. While some men wear cowboy hats and boots (which are also available in bright colors such as pink,

[5] A *quinceañera* is a celebration for young girls of fifteen as an initiation into adulthood. With origins in pre-Columbian cultures, *quinceañeras* have spread to many Latino cultures and religions. The celebration often includes a mass followed by a reception. The *quinceañera* wears an elaborate floor-length ball gown of white, cream, or a pastel color. The ensemble can include a train, headpiece, gloves, high-heeled shoes, and elaborate hair and makeup. The celebrant is accompanied by a similarly dressed male court and male attendants wearing tuxedos (Moreno 2005:336)

lemon and turquoise) others prefer to wear baseball caps and sneakers. Additionally other uniquely American emblems such as Disney and popular cartoon characters are prevalent among childrens' clothing.

Much has been written about the danger of "Americanization" with relation to the widespread consumption of American goods by the border population in Mexico. As Oscar Martinez points out, "few who reside on the Mexican side of the border are able to escape the overwhelming influence of the United States, and consequently, most Mexican borderlanders have direct or indirect ties to Americans. Such links have resulted in heavy consumption of U.S. products and popular culture, but that does not necessarily imply a corresponding loss of national identity; Mexicanness, as a rule, remains strongly embedded among all Mexican *fronterizos,* regardless of their external orientations".

To be sure, people along the Mexico-United States border have shaped their material culture, including their dress, with commodities and ideas from the United States. Yet a lively interest in American clothing is not a new thing in Mexican northern border cities. Heyman's work on the changing meaning of import consumption along the Mexico-United States border between the Porfirian 1880s and 1890s and the present provides us with a very good illustration of this. Heyman reminds us how the production of clothing was made more efficient and more elaborate by two imports. The first one was the American sewing machine. The second and most important one was imported information about styles of clothing based on Euro-American fashions mastered by women. "Specifically they drew on the Sears catalog (mentioned in oral histories as early as the 1920s, and probably predating that), as well as storefronts in U.S. border towns" (Heyman 1997:161).

As the author also points out, "*Aguapretense* shopped for new American clothes in Douglas while they bought used American clothes from peddlers and stores on the Mexican side (again, new garments from central Mexico began to be sold in this border extremity after 1982)" (1997:172). Heyman's description of the clothing consumption patterns along the border area of Agua Prieta, Sonora and the nearby Arizona town of Douglas emphasizes the import-oriented behavior of Mexican border consumers. At the same time, their penchant for the consumption of new and used American clothes can not be understood only through its foreign origin but must also be interpreted with reference to local use.

Second-hand imports from the United States pervade Mexico's northern border regions. Northern Chihuahua offers no exception, whether we look at goods themselves, such as clothing and appliances, or we focus on contexts of imports such as "las segundas" or everyday cross-border shopping. On one hand, Mexicans *fronterizos* are tied by second-hand imports to American consumer culture. On the other hand, their consumption of second-hand imports epitomizes "the kind of recycling that characterized the traditional mexicanidad" (Hill 2003:179). "Mexican" recycling – as Claudio Lomnitz calls it – involves "using products for entirely different aims that that they were designed for: plastic bags as plant pots, a broken-down refrigerator as a trunk for storage and so on" (Lomnitz 2001: 118). As Sarah Hill (2009) correctly points out, "the Mexican predilection for creative reuse is coming under the same influences that fostered the American tendency to simply throw something away once it is out of fashion, modestly marred, or reveals a tiny defect".

Alternatively, both consumers and traders redefine the meanings and uses of second-hand imports, contesting Western encodings and attempts to determine the conditions under which they are sold. Accordingly, garments take on a local cultural significance, exemplified by how secondhand clothes imported in Mexico make their way into a local dress universe in which their meanings are recontextualized according to local dress practices. Indeed, there are important processes of transculturation and cultural resistance movements along the Northern Mexican borderlands. Among the most recent of these movements to become popular after the mid-1970s is *el cholismo*, a mass youth phenomenon that emerged among the poor population in Northern Mexico.

Cholos

Cholos are urban youth who may be gang members, car club members, or simply influenced by the *cholo* lifestyle. They are recognized by their distinct dress, manners and language. Although *cholo* style varies from group to group, dress for men consists of baggy *chinos* (khaki pants) or khaki shorts, undershirts or white T-shirts, plaid long-sleeves shirts, and bandanas. *Cholas* usually wear khaki pants, T-shirts or tank tops, plaid long-sleeves shirts, flat black shoes, extensive makeup, and long hair. Make-up includes heavy eyeliner and brown lipstick. Both *cholos* and *cholas* may also signify gang membership through tattoos. Early popular *cholo* brands included Dickies and Ben Davis.

In the mid-1990s, hip hop fashion had taken on significant influence from the dress style of Los Angeles' cholos, including baggy pants, black ink tattoos, bandanas, and shirt tails outside one's pants. Tommy Hilfiger became the most prominent brand in 1990s hip hop and *cholo* street wear, though Polo, Calvin Klein, Nautica, DKNY and Ecko Unlimited are also very popular. The main elements of modern male hip hop and

cholo fashion are baggy or sagging jeans, high-top unlaced sneakers, and a bandana or do-rag tied around the head (often with a fitted cap on top). Large T-shirts are also standard street wear. Since Mexican manufactured garments of this type are not readily available, most of these brand-named clothes are either imported second-hand from the United States or branded copies made in China. The *chola/o* culture has been in turn influenced by hip-hop fashion that is inspiring local appropriations in some young men's dress.

The *cholos* surfaced in the barrios of Ciudad Juárez in the late 1970s. The influence came from East los Angeles., California and Tijuana. According to José Manuel Valenzuela (1988), a specialist in themes of youth identity on the U.S.-Mexico border and specific juvenile groups like *cholos* and *pachucos*, this style of clothing was readily available in El Paso, Texas. There are also some indications to suggest that the clothes worn by *cholos* were usually purchased second-hand. Indeed, Valenzuela mentions that the style of dress worn by *cholos* was not the kind of clothes that they would shop for in expensive stores but rather in *segundas* or second-hand markets. This provides a clear illustration of the incorporation of American second-hand clothes into youthful fashions such as the "*Cholo*" and "*Pachuco*" dress styles.

Pachucos

"*Pachucos*" are thought to be the precursors of the *cholos* who emerged in the later half of the twentieth century with their own distinct dress styles. *Pachucos* are regularly described as Mexican Zoot-Suiters, but some authors argue that *pachuquismo* (the pachuca/o subculture) existed long before the Zoot-Suiters came of age, and continues to survive to this day in both Chicano and Mexican society.

The most popular theory is that the *Pachuco* style originated in Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, and moved westward, following the line of migration of Mexican railroad workers or *traqueros* to Albuquerque, New Mexico, Tucson, Arizona, and to Los Angeles, California where it developed further. The *Pachuco* dress style subsequently gained popular recognition through its promotion in "Mexican Cinema" after famous comedian and film actor Germán Valdés from El Paso/Juarez, better-known by his artistic name "Tin-Tan," took on and propagated the *Pachuco* dress style and slang to the Mexican population and the rest of the world.

The "*Pachucos*" of the 1940s were characterized by their unique language (*caló*), their taste in music (*mambo, danzon, guaracha, rumba*, and *botecitos*) and their distinct style of dress. The outfit (*tacuche*) included baggy, pleated pants (*tramos*) held high on the waist and angling radically down to a tight fit around the ankles. A padded shoulder jacket (*carlango*) with broad lapels that hung down to the thighs. A silky dark or bright colored shirt (*lisa*) complemented by a short but wide tie. Thick-soled shoes (*calcos*) pointed at the toes, with metal tips and two-toned color black with a white middle often punctuated the look. Some *Pachucos* added a long decorative gold watch chain, a fedora type feathered hat (known as a *tando*), or both to the ensemble but many abandoned the hat in favor of wearing their slicked back hair in a ducktail style.

The "*Pachuca*", the female counterpart of the *Pachuco*, wore a knee-length (and therefore relatively short) pleated skirt, a long, broad-shouldered "finger-tip" coat or sweater, fishnet stockings or bobby socks pulled up the calves, and platform heels, saddle shoes, or *huarache* sandals. The preferred color of clothing was black. *Pachucas* also

wore heavy makeup and dark lipstick. Many pachucas also used "rats" (foam inserts) to lift their hair into lofty bouffant hairdos.

The *Pachucos* are another vibrant illustration of the appropriation of recycled clothing into local dress styles throughout the Northern Mexican borderlands. An old man who was born in Ciudad Juárez in 1931 recalled that his family was very poor when he was young, so they had to buy second-hand clothing on "the other side" of the border.

> En el caso mió no fue copiado, es original, o sea que mi familia fue demasiado pobre, cuando yo fui pequeño compraban ropa de segunda de ésa que venden del otro lado. A mis hermanos no les gustó la pachuqueada, únicamente a mí; bueno, algunos pantalones me quedaban grandes, algunas camisas me quedaban chicas y yo les ajustaba abajo, les doblaba y quedaba el pantalón tipo balón, tipo pachuco y ahí fue donde comencé a vestir así. Después comencé a trabajar, me empecé a vestir de pachuco y hasta la fecha me visto de pachuco: soy original, pachuco original, y no creo que haya otro del barrio de la Chaveña (Valenzuela 1988:224).

In the interview excerpt above, the old man explained that some shirts were too small and some pants were too big, so he used to wear them baggy on the leg but tapered at the ankle. This is how he began to dress like a *Pachuco* and to wear the style of pants worn by the *pachuco*. Second-hand clothing consumption in the Northern Mexican borderlands represents a site where local youth identities are both constructed and contested through dress as exemplified by the *pachuco* of the 1940s and 1950s and the *cholo*, Mexican youth of today. Pachucos and Cholo's carefully fashioned appearance

can be seen as an act of cultural *bricolage* through which secondhand clothes take on local meanings and are adapted to local circumstances.

The used clothing trade along the Mexico-United States border leads to creative interpretations and exhibitions of clothing items available from second-hand clothing vendors in local markets. These original sartorial styles reveal how American used clothing is imported and sold through a domestic commercial system, undergoing at the local level various processes of re-contextualisation into the socio-economic structures and local dress universe of the Northern Mexican borderlands.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

The establishment of *maquiladoras* in Northern Mexico corresponds to a period of accelerated industrialization and population growth in Ciudad Juárez. At the border, a trade developed in used goods brought from the United States to Mexico. The used clothing business in the El Paso–Juarez area developed rapidly in the mid-1960s when commercial used-clothing dealers started in the trade. This frontier region was the perfect setting to increase their used clothing trade, for just on the other side of a border bridge across the Rio Grande was an underground businessman's dream: the largest informal economy one could hope for. American used clothing was a prime product since it was geared towards customers in a neighbour country where the per capita income was extremely low. This thesis has explored briefly the historical formation of Mexico's urban northern-border region in order to better understand how second-hand clothing

came to be not only acceptable but desirable to Mexican border consumers who have supported over the years this cross-border trade to such a high degree, thus extending our understanding of consumer capitalism in the borderlands.

The U.S.-Mexico border is a place of contrast where a vibrant "economy of discards" coexists side by side with the assembly plants of the transnational corporations. Jessica Chapin (2003) uses the distinction between economy of "assembly" and economy of "disassembly" to discuss the coexistence between two modes of subsistence, two types of sociality and economic activity in Ciudad Juárez. "The transnational, or "assembly", economy, represented by the maquiladora industry in Ciudad Juarrez, is based on a linear system of production and values that are set by market forces of supply and demand. Components are assembled to form a finished product that is to be purchased, consumed, discarded and then replaced. Alongside this, however, is a universe of "disassembly" – a vast economy of resignification, recombination, and recycling in which values are transformed are part of everyday use" (Chapin 2003:9).

The *fayuca* trade of used clothing between the United States and Mexico somehow works as a push-pull circuit between forces of production and consumption as well as waste and recycling. Ironically, a portion of the clothes that the smugglers bring back has come full circle since it was originally made in Mexico by *maquiladora* workers. Mexican labour was paid to make these items, which were exported to the U.S. and sold at retail. Then the items come back to Mexico used and are resold at a fraction of original cost (Marling 2006:6). Most factory workers are forced to resort to such economic strategies because of the low-wages they earned in the *maquiladoras*. Thus, it

is not in the least surprising that countries with export-oriented production such as Mexico also import second-hand clothing.

At the same time, it is possible to view this return to Mexico of the products of their own labour as a form of repossession. Indeed, some Third World producers are able to contest globalized production processes which use them as a source of cheap labour by recycling, stealing, copying, faking, counterfeiting and in other ways modifying and restoring the clothes which are produced for large-scale multinational brands in *maquiladoras* (Kothari and Laurie 2005). These recycled, fake and second-hand garments are then worn by the workers and retailed in local, regional and international markets. In this manner, *maquiladora* workers and local entrepreneurs profit from global brand-name clothing corporations and challenge their hegemonic control on the global market.

The *ropa usada* trade along the U.S.-Mexico border stands as a vibrant manifestation of the excesses of consumer capitalism. In contrast to the desired linear trajectory of mass produced garments in a consumer capitalist economy that are meant to be purchased, consumed, discarded and replaced, the ethnographic research presented in this thesis has shown that this trajectory is far from representing the end of value but turns instead into a new starting point for its creation. Set aside - left over - taken out of cycles of consumption in the U.S., used clothes can be resold by the pound and imported back into Mexico to acquire a new life in the hands of Mexican consumers. By documenting the history, trading culture, and contemporary refashioning of secondhand clothing in the Mexico-United States borderlands, the various processes of appropriation,

transformation and redefinition that second-hand clothes undergo by crossing borders come into sight.

This ethnographic research constitutes a vibrant illustration of the multiple, often hidden, ways through which value can be generated from unwanted clothing. The cross-border movement of commodities is this case of used clothing, between two different territories of value, is really interesting in terms of the social-political construction of value. How can it possibly be worth it to pay bribes and risk fines to smuggle *maquiladora* produced clothes, once used, back into Mexico? Observing the transit of commodities and labouring people, Heyman (2004:305) has come to see borders, as places where value (in the Marxian sense) steps up or steps down in the world system, hence his phrasing of them as "nodes" at the center of relationships extending between two different territories of value. The author gives the example of a pair of blue jeans sold for $20 in Denver, United States, which may cost $5 in labor, land, and materials in Torreon, Mexico and argues that "it is in the passage from the Mexican port of Ciudad Juarez to the United States port of El Paso where this value is realized" (Heyman 2004:305).

This pair of blue jeans will eventually come back to Mexico used to be resold at a fraction of original cost. The journey of someone's used pair of blue jeans to Mexico starts at home. Someone cleans a closet and donates a bag of clothes to a nonprofit organization. Then, the clothes wind up in sweltering warehouses all along the 2,000-mile U.S. southern border. In some ways this place would seem to be the last destination. It is where many clothes apparently go to die. But, far from ending their useful time on

earth, they are destined for resurrection. The used pair of blues jeans can be bought by the pound (for 0.06$) and imported back into Mexico to be resold for one dollar or even four dollars if it is a branded one. This time it is in the passage from the United States port of El Paso to the Mexican port of Ciudad Juarez where this value is realized.

A key feature of the domestic commercial system through which used clothes from the U.S. are turned into fashionable garments with greater value on the Mexican market, I argue, is smuggling and its apparent secrecy and invisibility which enable garments to move between different regimes of value (Norris 2004) from one side of the border to the other. As Heyman (1994a:55) points out, smuggling (of people and of goods) means that the activity is legally prohibited; and it is the defiance of this prohibition which adds value to the goods above and beyond normal unbounded commerce. This thesis has shown how the border plays an active part in the economic processes through which the value of used clothing emerges.

To move from one side of the border to the other, used clothes must be transformed in various ways to become of potential value to Mexican consumers. Another significant contribution of this research consisted in showing the importance that is assigned to the work of retrieval, preparation, re-allocation and re-fashioning that goes into the marketing of once so very personal possessions such as clothing. It has described in an ethnographic fashion how used clothes are refashioned and recontextualized in multiple acts of refurbishment that give individuality and new life to garments that have been cast off and leftover, while creating economic value in the process.

The cross-border sourcing activities of Mexican "ant traders" on "the other side" initiate a set of "material–symbolic transformations" (Munn 1997) through which

value is created from unwanted but still wearable clothing. These transformations begin in their interactions with American textile sorting companies that specialize in extracting value from recycled clothing. At this stage, Mexican capital is invested to buy used clothes and Mexican labor is mobilized to process them. The description of the rapid and effective sorting of clothing performed by the *surtidoras* reveals aspects of value making relating to their extensive knowledge and expertise in terms of textile qualities (based on color, texture, smell, etc.), fashions and markets.

These value transformations continue in the informal marketing and selling of second-hand clothes throughout Ciudad Juárez. The used clothing retail scene is both an important sector of employment in Ciudad Juárez and essential source of provisioning for Mexican border consumers. It is also a local context in which value transformations and the actions that bring them about come to the fore through various acts of clothing refurbishment, merchandizing and display. Mexican border consumers value the nature of consumption in "las segundas" and the particular kind of shopping experience they offer. Their liking for, and consumption of used American clothes must be interpreted with reference to local contexts of imports such as "las segundas" and local dress styles. This research has contributed to show how "the border has always been an unusually good source for clothing of U.S. origin, much of it used" (Joe Heyman 1994b:195). It has also presented clear evidence of the appropriation of recycled clothing into youthful fashions such as the "*Cholo*" and "*Pachuco*" dress styles.

This ethnographic study of a whole series of "material–symbolic transformations", transactions and processes of circulation and exchange with respect to the *fayuca* trade of used clothing in the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border region reveals

interesting aspects of value making from a "bottom-up" perspective. In the sphere of economic exchange, borderlands are also sites of power and struggle. The cross-border movement of commodities challenges the authority and regulatory power of the state in a similar manner as the cross-border movement of people does (Kloppers 2004:144). Although Mexican authorities attempt to control the *fayuca* trade of secondhand clothing from the United States, this research has shown how in practice such rules have failed to limit the cross-border flow of this popular commodity.

The perspective of the participants in "illicit" activities across international borders has too often been neglected in studies which favored perspectives "from above", ones that overstress "the influence of corporate capitalism in defining the state and its limits'"(Donnan and Wilson 1999: 90). State-centric analyses of border economics rarely take into account such bottom-up perspectives. It has been left largely to anthropologists to view states and illegal practices from below and to show how borders represent a particularly fertile ground for informal commerce and illicit economic dealing.

Ethnographic work on these illicit activities encourages "a reassessment of basic theoretical ideas concerning the nexus of legality/illegality, state/non-state, and formal/non-formal power relations" (Nordstrom 2000: 38). Even if these activities are illegal because they defy the norms and rules of formal political authority, they are usually quite acceptable in the eyes of those most closely involved, and they can even have widespread social legitimacy (van Schendel and Abraham: 2005; Heyman and Smart 1999; Flynn 1997). As many other informal market workers, *fayuqueros* are ambiguous social agents. As Ribeiro (2006: 35) points out, "they are small entrepreneurs who wish to work honestly but who make money out of niches that escape state control".

The emphasis in this research has been placed on the networks of "ant traders," who respond to the local-market demand for American used clothing and the determination that they must demonstrate on a daily basis to subvert the official rules. Cross-border traders are often confronted with a hostile policy environment at both a national and regional level thus undermining the viability of their economic activities. Here is an ostensibly illegal practice (by national standards) being regulated by local standards – which lends it a degree of legitimacy even while it remains an extralegal practice. Mexican "ant traders" both operate outside the system and attempt to bend the system to their own ends by organizing themselves, even as the system – here embodied by the municipal council and its inspectors - tries to control them. This research has detailed the tug-of-war between such illicit networks, which are culturally and socio-economically part of the borderland economy, and increased commodity controls at the Mexican border. To be sure, the illicit trade in used clothing that is grounded in the local economic fabric of the border region of El Paso Ciudad Juarez seems to have remained undisturbed by increased commodity controls at the Mexican border.

Along this line, this thesis has illustrated the interplay between the strict, state-based aspects of borders and their micro, market-level aspects. It has underlined the agency of these economic actors that arises from the economic culture of the border region and how they bypass the multiple activities of governments and increase the global economic integration of the border region. This thesis did not, however, merely exemplify the agency that borderlanders demonstrate to get around state attempts to interrupt illegal cross-border flows. It has also highlighted the extent to which states' borders produce and enable clandestine border crossings.

Participants in small-scale trading across international borders are "free traders" – but from below – who trade with little regard for national and border regulations (Staudt 2001:124). Their livelihoods depend upon crossing state lines and exploiting differential economic opportunities on either side. The ant traders' paradox is that for them the border is at the same time a basis for and a threat to their working lives. One of the major contribution of this ethnographic study of cross-border small-scale trading lies in its analyses of the double-faced nature of borders as both economic opportunities and barriers for small-time traders. As Grimson (2002:168) suggests, "without borders they would not exist, so they would never call for "an end to borders." Still, an undue "hardening" of the border demands more sophisticated methods of smuggling, and this could also be their downfall. In other words they do want state borders but they want them on their own terms".

Their cross-border activities are examples of economic practices that are current worldwide and are part of what can be called 'economic globalization from below' (Ribeiro 2006: 3). Their livelihoods depend upon crossing state lines and exploiting differential economic opportunities on either side of state and other political borders. This anthropological research contributes to the study of international borders by showing how "ant traders" transgress and negotiate territorial, legal and institutional boundaries in their everyday lives along the Northern Mexican borderlands.

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