

6 Inheriting the Border

*Because we live on the border, people came to work in business.
We know both sides. We learned by living here and teaching
others.*

—Mexican border resident

TITO WAS BORN IN EL NANCE, MEXICO to a poor family with little farmland. He grew up crossing the border to visit family and exchange goods. Now, Tito has two houses: an old cement block one and the new, two-story house with Plexiglas windows, pillars, tiled porches and floors, and an indoor bathroom with a rare hot-water shower. Tito sees himself first as a farmer and second as a businessman. He takes pride in helping others so much so that many people on both sides of the border call him Uncle Tito. His story highlights the development of, and ethical dilemmas involved in, “business” or contraband as a way of earning a living at the border.

As a young man, Tito worked hard to buy land, little by little. He migrated seasonally to work on coffee plantations in southern Chiapas. He saved to purchase pack animals, which he later sold to acquire one of the first cars at the border in the mid-1970s to transport (or smuggle) corn to Guatemala. He became the first local taxi driver, as he drove residents and goods to nearby cities on both sides of the border. He began in the corn business, selling Mexican corn to Guatemalans, because as a farmer he knew corn well. Gradually, he became familiar with more products and entered more profitable and diverse enterprises. Both the Mexican and Guatemalan states consider his businesses illegal contraband because he uses the unmonitored road to sell goods over the border, rather than official crossings. To Tito, and many border residents, however, such practices constitute business in a region where, despite free trade policies, it is difficult for peasants to participate in cross-border commerce.

Tito acknowledges that his businesses are officially illegal but believes they are legitimate. He conducts business “the way it has to be done,” he says, given limited economic opportunities and bureaucratic obstacles to legally engage in cross-border commerce. Bribes are necessary to work, performing a similar function to the procedures required to manage his legal businesses (he has a dry-goods store in his home), including acquiring permits, licenses, and social and political contacts. In fact, bribes can be more predictable and transparent than formal taxes and procuring official documents.

Although it is not necessarily a rags-to-riches narrative, residents recount Tito’s story as a successful example. From a meager upbringing, he struggled to provide a good life for his family in a region where one of the few alternatives is undocumented migration to the United States. His story highlights how business developed as a way of life and work at the border. According to Javier, Tito’s nephew and a university student in northern Mexico:

Tito worked and saved. His family did well. [They] were the ones who began and continue to work in [the] coffee and sugar [businesses]. They succeeded because they were first, smart, and knew about business opportunities. Tito made money because he worked hard. Before, he was poor like the rest of us. I remember when I worked with him in his fields as a small boy. He had just started working a little in business; corn, I think. People saw that the corn business was good and started working too.

He looked at me to make sure I understood: “Business is important to people here. It is how they make a living.”²¹

Cross-border intermediaries, smugglers, and residents more tangentially involved in these enterprises struggle to earn a living and justify their choices in a local economy where contraband is a major facet of everyday life. Smugglers’ work practices challenge preconceived ideas of what constitutes legitimate, ethical, and worthwhile labor as they refer to contraband as “business.”²² Yet the contraband economy does not necessarily open up new economic paths. Instead, it may continue and exacerbate existing class distinctions and clientelist politics in the region. Border middlemen also help sustain the regional economy and generate profits for officials and formal companies through bribes and smuggling cheaper goods. In fact, such intermediaries may be pawns in larger regional patterns of accumulation, whereby larger-scale smugglers, businesses, and officials profit while residents bear

the risks of arrest, banditry, and accidents. Stigmatizing and criminalizing border middlemen obscures the profits they generate for formal businesses and officials. It also neglects to consider how free trade policies have excluded border inhabitants from legal commercial avenues. Because the middleman smuggler's main responsibilities are to arrange transport and bribe officials, the opportunities of border residence can quickly become risks.

Business Ethics

Locals rarely use the term *contrabando*, or contraband. They mostly use the term *negocio*, or business, to characterize their legitimate economic activities, which state agents and institutions label "contraband." Business describes the work practices surrounding the cross-border sale of goods such as corn, coffee, sugar, and clothing that avoid official regulation, documentation, and taxation.³ Business involves trading products that are not considered illicit or dangerous in and of themselves but become illegal only because they are transported through the unmonitored crossing. Business not only refers to the act of smuggling but also encompasses a wider set of practices, peoples, and ideas. Participants include legal businesses, families, agricultural producers, truckers, cargo loaders, state agents, and criminal actors, which inhabit a "gray space" that renders sharp distinctions between legal and illegal and licit and illicit problematic.⁴

I use the terms *businessmen* and *middlemen* because contraband is largely a male sphere. However, women play critical, although less visible, roles by using border differentials strategically. Women stock home stores in Guatemala with cheaper Mexican goods, and some women sell food, clothing, and drinks across the border to cargo loaders and truckers. Women aid their husbands and fathers with financial accounting and certifications. One young woman, on return from the United States, began smuggling gasoline. An exception to male domination of the contraband sector is Karina, a Guatemalan woman who collaborates with Mexican merchants to sell Mexican corn and peanuts to Guatemalan merchants. She also has a small restaurant. She believes "each has his or her clients and place [to sell]. [People] do not prefer to buy from men or women. It just depends if the product is good." She and her husband moved to the border from further in the Guatemalan interior ten years ago for the business opportunities. She explained, "Perhaps it was my inheritance; we all liked [business]," because her parents were originally from the border and her mother was an itinerant food vendor.

Border residents defend their right to engage in business, and to Tito's nephew Javier this right is sacrosanct in a region where few forms of livelihood remain. As he reminded me, "Business is what we have to work in here. It is an advantage of living at the border." Residents separate the business of smuggling daily goods like corn, sugar, and coffee from what they define as illicit enterprises, including smuggling migrants, drugs, and weapons. They draw the distinction by arguing that such goods are necessary for survival, and that they lack access to legal mechanisms to engage in cross-border trade. Residents recognize that smuggling migrants, narcotics, and weapons has become more dangerous due to the increasing involvement not only of the state, but also gangs and cartels.

The lines, however, are not always clear. Residents sometimes referred to the same enterprise as contraband and business in the same conversation as their ethical judgments shifted according to their own social position, the businessmen involved and their labor practices, the direction of the commerce, and fluctuating state vigilance. The social and economic organizations of businesses are complex, intertwine with transnational legal and illegal enterprises, and are enmeshed with, and depend on, community and kinship ethics, trust, and personal relationships. Like the northern Mexico truckers in Robert Alvarez's study, truckers, middlemen, and smugglers at the border similarly "use cultural resources of patronage, *confianza* (trust), family ties, and *compadrazgo*" (a godparent relationship that socially binds families in reciprocal obligations) to manage businesses characterized by competition and risk.⁵ They use their history of border residence and the resources of cross-border family, social, and economic ties to assert their right to act as border middlemen. However, as border surveillance and the presence of transnational criminal networks intensify and local jealousies begin to manifest, claims to be conducting honest business become increasingly suspect. Frontera Comalapa is not only a destination for coffee and sugar, but has also become a regional hub in the cocaine trade.⁶ Although some truckers refer to themselves as *fleteros* (those who arrange transport) or *transportistas*, in the drug trafficking landscape, Central Americans who transport drugs for drug trafficking organizations are also called *transportistas*, or transporters.⁷ *Transportistas* used by drug trafficking organizations are, according to Steven Dudley, often "thieves or experts in contraband" who know important routes, have connections to officials, and may possess dual nationality, but it is important to note that they are not the ones managing

the flows.⁸ Although they strive to separate their business from more illicit flows, many residents now view commerce destined for Frontera Comalapa with suspicion. In 2013, Frontera Comalapa witnessed a wave of murders, and rumors abound that cartel leaders use it as an operating node.⁹ Nearby cities of Camojá, La Mesilla, and La Democracia, Guatemala, are also key operating areas for drug rings based in Huehuetenango that collaborate with the Sinaloa cartel.¹⁰

As more residents became involved in the contraband economy in the 1990s and 2000s, they formed associations to govern prices and rules of participation. They stressed that everyone who lives along this border road has a right to work in enterprises that rely on the route. Businesses are either distributed among family and close friends or organized as rotating associations, like the corn merchants, so that members take turns transporting commerce and earning income. Local smugglers justify the contraband economy in terms of its community benefits.¹¹ Actions that redistribute profits help garner local legitimacy for the smugglers. However, some businesses, like coffee and sugar, have become family monopolies due to the larger amount of capital and stronger connections with officials required to engage in business. When businesses depart from redistributive community norms, they raise suspicions and jealousies.

Because many residents entered the smuggling economy when they no longer had sufficient land or resources to sustain farming in the context of an agricultural crisis, locals view border residence as their historical subsistence right and resource for survival—what they call their inheritance. Residents have exchanged goods across the border for their entire lives, whether it was a satchel of corn or, now, a ten-ton truckload of sodas. As one resident put it, “I work in business because it is my inheritance. I learned to engage in business as a part of my heritage. We are from the border, and the same border offers us this opportunity.” Tito recalled his father delivering corn to friends in Guatemala on his donkey. In a volatile and risky market, business savvy is not the only required skill. One must also cultivate caution, patience, and relationships with state agents, other residents, and producers, buyers, and sellers on both sides of the border. It is necessary to be familiar with roads, currency fluctuations, different products, and policing patterns on both sides of the border. Businessmen may earn large profits, lose money at other times, or wait months with little work due to the seasonality of much of their commerce (for example, coffee and corn). Successful smugglers usually carry

both a Mexican and a Guatemalan cell phone, because they know where the borders of service fluctuate.

Border residents, from a history of living their lives across the border, use their cultural capital to engage in business. Most have cross-border kin and share close cross-border ties through social events and economic relations. Tito played soccer on the Guatemalan side as a boy, and Guatemalan women used to go to the Mexican side to mill their corn. Tito's father sold satchels of corn to Guatemalan friends and later taught his sons about business. Roberto, the former community president of El Girasol, Guatemala, laughed when I asked him how he met his business partners in El Nance, Mexico, "We all grew up together. About 90 percent of El Nance are relatives of mine." Other rural communities may have resources such as rich soil, but for border residents, their inheritance is based on a history of close cross-border relationships and knowledge that enables them to conduct business.

Many businessmen claim their work provides an alternative to U.S. migration in a region where northward migratory flows surged in the 1990s following agricultural reforms and the collapse in international coffee prices. Yet migration plays an integral role in fostering and sustaining businesses. Migrant earnings or remittances can be used to purchase a truck, begin a smuggling business by purchasing goods, and to pay an entry fee to a local association of businessmen or truckers to work. Previously, to start a smuggling business, residents needed access to capital from land or livestock sales or had to take out loans with high interest rates from local banks or fellow residents. When I visited in 2011, there was a new Internet cafe in Santa Rosa, Mexico, called La Grange, named after the Georgia town where the owner, Ernesto, spent many years. Ernesto stressed the multiple strategies critical to his success including smuggling a variety of products, trucking, his store, and U.S. earnings. Although it is difficult to assess the validity, he asserted he earned roughly US\$100,000 during the previous year from his diverse enterprises.¹² Not only did U.S. connections provide necessary capital to start a business, but many smugglers brought their pickup trucks to the border directly from the United States. Others met future business partners in the United States. When Mexican border residents began migrating in the 1990s, they followed Guatemalans from the border region to the same destinations in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina.

However, migration connections and resources do not ensure success. Many find themselves excluded from border business associations on return

due to increasing competition. When I visited in 2011, twenty-one-year-old Graciela tapped me on the shoulder at a soccer match in El Nance after hearing that I spoke English. She wanted to practice. She had lived in North Carolina for ten years before returning in 2008. Her father lost his job in a factory during the economic recession. Unauthorized migrants cannot acquire driver's licenses in North Carolina, and this limited his job search. They decided to return home. She wanted to continue her education in Mexico, but found it difficult to transfer her credentials. A relative promised to get her a job in a hotel in Playa del Carmen, but after she had her daughter, she could no longer pursue this option. She said the stores in Frontera Comalapa didn't offer many jobs. What there was to do here, however, "was business." Her father bought a three-ton truck to work in the corn trade. Even though he had money and a truck, he lacked business experience and lost money after he purchased corn at a high price in Mexico and prices declined in Guatemala. Graciela decided to enter the gasoline smuggling business to help her family. She was the only woman and encountered some resistance, but it was one of the few viable jobs open to her that was also compatible with bringing her infant along.

Some smugglers specialize in products and commercial chains they know best, like coffee, sugar, or corn. The most successful smugglers and truckers are adept at commercializing multiple products to compensate for price fluctuations and seasonality. Trucking and business are not profitable if trucks carry merchandise in only one direction. Mexican corn trucks usually return with Guatemalan cement blocks and when the corn and coffee harvests end, smugglers with more resources and connections transport other goods. One Mexican smuggler noted:

Some businessmen do better than others. You really only [earn money] if you diversify . . . corn, oranges, onions, sodas, coffee. [Many products] are seasonal, so [people] with a wider vision [succeed]. You get to know the markets, make new connections, and sell other things as well.

Middlemen Smugglers

Border residents, through their control of the border route, developed a niche role as middleman intermediaries. Experience in the cross-border corn trade facilitated other smuggling and trucking businesses. Corn merchants, often called coyotes, defend their roles:

We decided that if people come from far away to sell corn to Guatemala that they need to use a local intermediary. We realized [local work] was threatened. [Corn] has to be given to someone from here. Now merchants know they need to sell to us. They cannot just pass [through here] directly. [Otherwise] we are left without work. It is important to provide work for people here.

The term *coyote* generally refers to the abuses of migrant smugglers or middlemen merchants who exploit small producers' lack of access to markets and transportation as they purchase their goods cheaply and in bulk to transport to warehouses, companies, and other buyers.¹³ Some border middlemen reject the term *coyote* and prefer to be called *negociantes* (businessmen/merchants), *camioneros* (truckers), or *fleteros*, but others embrace the term without stigma. Producers are ambivalent. They recognize that intermediaries provide critical access to markets, but also believe that middlemen exploit producers' lack of market access and profit off of their products.

Many policy makers and scholars assume that middlemen necessarily exploit the vulnerability of others. Some residents and producers argue that coffee smugglers exploit producers, depress producer prices, monopolize the market, and earn large sums of money. This can be true, but also obscures how border middlemen are pawns for larger formal-sector businesses, as well as for officials who benefit from the shadow economy. Many smaller-scale smugglers struggle to support their families in a context with little other employment and unpredictable profits.

The case of coffee illustrates the complex role that coffee smugglers play in the transnational legal and extralegal economy in the context of economic crisis. The deregulation of the international coffee market and the dismantling of Mexico's National Coffee Institute (INMECAFE) in 1989 led to a crisis and collapse in coffee prices, which was particularly acute in Chiapas. According to Marie-Christine Renard, "The National Coordinator of Coffee Growers Organizations estimated that producers lost 65 percent of their income in the first fifteen years of the crisis."¹⁴ These factors, combined with reduced access to credit and state supports, led a few transnational corporations to dominate the coffee economy.¹⁵ As strong national industries in both Mexico and Guatemala, the coffee and sugar industries carry high duties or prohibitions on cross-border sale. Coffee is among Mexico and Guatemala's largest exports, and 6 percent of Mexico's and 31 percent of Guatemala's economically active population depends on coffee.¹⁶ Coffee and sugarcane are excluded from free

trade arrangements between Mexico and Guatemala and still carry duties.¹⁷ Due to these restrictions, people who smuggle coffee and sugar require more capital and connections to purchase it and bribe officials.

Locals regard coffee and sugar smuggling businesses as more controversial and risky than corn, which is a lower-value product. Border resident Rigo, who has worked for immigration throughout Mexico, explained:

The difference between coffee and corn is that coffee is worth more . . . it has a higher price, and so the tax they are avoiding is higher. But does coffee hurt you? No. Tortillas? No. Basically they are the same. The only difference is price. What people see as having a greater value, or higher price, they will say is more illicit.

Higher-value products structure a different approach to smuggling: one that requires more capital, more connections to state agents, and more secrecy (hence less openness to more participants). Legality emerges as a sliding ethical scale, rather than a black-and-white assessment, in a context where large companies have privileged access to cross-border trade whereas poorer regional inhabitants face insurmountable restrictions and opaque guidelines. Luis Hernández Navarro (2004) further critiques the ethics of a coffee system that marginalizes the rural population and depresses the prices they receive for their harvests to the benefit of transnational traders and roasters:

Ironically, coffee is one of the products where Mexican and Central American farmers should be profitable according to the theory of comparative advantages. But instead of a bonanza, coffee cultivation under current conditions has condemned the growers to poverty, exile, death, or charity. Meanwhile transnational traders and international investment funds accumulate huge fortunes.¹⁸

Coffee smuggling, which many residents view as a relatively lucrative business, poses risks as it simultaneously intersects with the formal regional economy. Tito and his sons, along with a few other families, control most of the coffee smuggling through this route. Coffee is smuggled in both directions, depending on the year, prices, currency differentials, and demands for specific varieties. The warehouses to which he smuggles coffee distribute it throughout Mexico and even export it abroad to the United States and Europe.

Tito's coffee business provides employment that ripples through his extended family and community. Without Tito, the truckers and cargo loaders



Figure 6.1. Coffee cargo loader waiting for work.

SOURCE: Author photo.

he employs would be out of work (Figure 6.1). Tito pays a commission to his mother-in-law to use her land as one of his depots for truck exchanges, which is her only source of income. His sister-in-law sells food and drinks to the cargo loaders and truckers. Through his friendship with the municipal president, Tito receives certificates to document that the coffee he transports from Guatemala to Mexico is produced in Mexican communities. His daughter Nanci fills out the forms in their home storefront. Tito distributes the certificates to other truckers, who either work with him or must gain his permission to work to receive the documents and official tolerance. Some people may see him as monopolizing this business, but most view him as a benevolent patron fulfilling obligations that tie wealthier and poorer residents together. It is difficult and costly to establish relations with clients and state agents. Tito helps others by lending his name and managing the risks. The certificates confirm the coffee is Mexican, provide market access, and protect truckers from state agents. They are with Don Tito.

Another border resident reminded me that, rather than a smuggler or businessman, Tito is a *comisionista*, meaning he usually does not purchase

or sell coffee. Instead, he works on commission for warehouses, individual speculators, and even regional warehouses of corporations such as AMSA (Agro Industries of Mexico), which is Mexico's strongest commercial firm.¹⁹ AMSA, which belongs to ECOM Industrial Agroindustrial Corp., "a global commodity merchant and sustainable supply chain management company,"²⁰ finances coyote intermediaries who purchase coffee from small producers at low prices.²¹ Some coyotes, like Tito, extend these practices across the border. They help companies supplement their inventories for export and acquire different or cheaper varieties from across the border while evading taxes, documentation, and inspection. ECOM is responsible for nearly 70 percent of Mexico's coffee exports, with AMSA alone contributing half of Mexico's coffee exports.²² Searching for coffee at the lowest price is complemented, and mimicked, by extralegal strategies whereby coyotes depress the prices of rural producers and contribute to corporate profits. Coffee corporations, through their relations with border smugglers and middlemen, also weave between legal and illegal lines at the border, but they can easily distance themselves from accountability or knowledge of these practices.²³

As a *comisionista*, Tito brokers coffee sales across the border and arranges transport and official collusion. Some *comisionistas* become smugglers when they acquire more resources, but most remain *comisionistas* because their risks and vulnerabilities to price and demand fluctuations are lower. Tito may seem to control local border flows, but his work is intimately related to larger companies and officials who reap more substantial benefits and face little risk.

Border middlemen are tied to prevailing arrangements of state and commercial power even as they seek to subvert it through smuggling. In addition to bribes, Tito and other local smugglers help finance local politicians and purchase the votes of their neighbors. In return, officials facilitate smuggling, help forge permits, and repay smugglers double after elections. The communities can benefit when wealthier residents encourage the municipality to provide projects. In other instances, though, in exchange for turning a blind eye to smuggling, some officials ignore community needs. The municipality of Frontera Comalapa, Mexico, has largely been a PRI stronghold known for conservatism and allegations of official corruption. In March 2016, Jorge Antonio Aguilar Lucas, the PRI municipal president, was ousted and arrested for alleged implication in the murder of councilman and former municipal presidential candidate for the Ecological Green Party of Mexico (PVEM)²⁴

Jesus Alaín Anzueto Roblero.²⁵ Other colluding municipal employees were arrested as they attempted to use this border route to escape to Guatemala. Aguilar Lucas has since been declared innocent and was reinstated in September 2016. Collusion between residents and officials depresses desire for change in this context. An opposition candidate who came to El Nance to campaign invited women to a meeting about resisting corruption. When Tito's wife saw her sister returning from the meeting, she half-jokingly asked, "Are you betraying Tito?" At the end of my fieldwork, when I left my car at Tito's, his son had covered the entire back window with a picture of the PRI candidate.²⁶

Tito may provide social, political (in terms of votes and local support), and economic capital to state officials, but he also occupies the more vulnerable position in these patron–client relations. About ten years ago, he was arrested for smuggling, and each year his business depends on the willingness of officials to cooperate. His wife lamented that the officials allow him to work, "but there are always more people to pay . . . They just keep paying. The authorities think he earns more than he does." Many smugglers and middlemen reinvest profits directly back into the business. Some barely earn enough to pay back monthly bank loans and bribes. Many lose money. Due to the exclusion of border peasants from formal trade venues, as specified in Chapter 5, some surmise it might be less expensive to conduct business, if they could, legally.

In this interpretation, some local smugglers merely get by (and also are being taken advantage of) in a larger commercial system that marginalizes them alongside the producers they purportedly exploit. Smugglers help sustain the livelihoods of underpaid officials through bribes while they contribute to the expansion of the policing apparatus to combat smuggling. Others point out that residents have work because companies want to avoid the taxes and prohibitions. As another resident put it:

If companies paid taxes, they would not need Tito. He does not manage the money to purchase coffee since he is just the *comisionista*, but he knows who sells it . . . and they come looking for him. Some work with warehouses or particular buyers, the rich people who hoard and speculate, and the companies who have permits to export abroad.

Tito asserts his important role:

[Mexican and Guatemalan buyers and sellers] cannot interchange directly since the place of exchange is here [because the road is unmonitored]. They

do not want to go through the official border. They need us in between. People come looking here because it is a border.

Another resident summed up the benefits and lack of risks for the coffee companies, as well as the wider economic processes in which Tito and border middlemen are embedded: “[The companies] do not care where the coffee is from. They only care about the quality. They do not check where the bags are from. It does not matter. They just mark it all as [being from] Comalapa.” In this fashion, warehouses and companies benefit from smugglers who circumvent regulations and taxes to supplement company quotas. Similarly, Carolyn Nordstrom highlights how the legal and extralegal intertwine as companies profit from extralegal practices while maintaining plausible deniability about how contracts and goods are obtained.²⁷ As one CFO of a multinational company told Carolyn Nordstrom:

I guess we know how it works. But we don’t. Because this all works by not asking. We don’t ask the site manager how we got a system up and running. He does, or he doesn’t. We ask for the formal reports. We know not to ask for the, ah, details.²⁸

Such extralegal strategies do not threaten the formal economy, but instead dovetail with the prevailing ethics of accumulation and business practices in the legal economy.²⁹ According to Marie-Christine Renard, overproduction, which led to price declines for farmers and increased profits for roasters, branders, and exporters, is due to specific global corporate strategies whereby:

Firms . . . save on raw materials by substituting coffee from one region with that from another without alterations in the taste of the final product. For example, Proctor & Gamble substituted the 500,000 bags of washed mild coffee from Mexico with *robust* coffee from Vietnam.³⁰

Tito’s fashioning of certificates that label Guatemalan coffee as Mexican and the warehouses’ tactics of supplementing their inventories with cheaper smuggled coffee from across the border both mimic and supplement this legitimate corporate strategy.

Trucking as a Way of Life

Tito’s brother Virgilio told me, “Now my truck is my machete.” In light of the lack of options for corn farming, his pickup truck is essential for him to earn a living smuggling corn, beans, and peanuts. Residents believe that business

allows them to migrate to the United States less often than others in the countryside. Many residents capitalized on U.S. migrant remittances or earnings to first purchase trucks but believe that, when there is business at the border, “we can stay here, and there is work.” Owning a truck enables an individual to enter the contraband economy to transport goods. Becoming a trucker requires less capital and official connections than becoming a middleman or businessman. Residents regard truck ownership with pride and as an avenue for economic mobility.

Robert Alvarez notes the aura of masculine pride surrounding trucking in Mexico:

Throughout Mexico, truckers partake of the image and reputation of the macho folk hero of the road . . . The trucker seems to command the highway, disdaining the danger for which Mexican highways are notorious, and relishing adventure, spontaneity, women, and tequila, all the while sacrificing for the good of the family he maintains and supports.³¹

At the border, on the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, truckers lead the parade. Red, white, and green (the colors of the Mexican flag) balloons and placards of the Virgin adorn trucks. Some drivers attach speakers to their trucks to blast music and prayers. Truckers proudly emblazon their trucks with the names of their children or with refrains such as, “The Solitary Coyote” or “All of this for not having studied” (*Todo por no estudiar*). Trucking is a niche job specialty of border residents. The truckers’ parking lot, established in 2011, enforces truckers’ claims to the border as their inheritance, or their historically given means of livelihood.

When I returned in 2011, I noticed the loading depot near where the unmonitored border road meets the Mexican highway was no longer occupied by merely a few trucks and trailers exchanging cargo. Instead it was a parking lot for nearly 100 ten-ton trucks, all owned by Mexican border residents. Two women had established a storefront to sell snacks and drinks, and the truckers had constructed a roofed patio area with tables and two toilet and shower stalls. When I had last visited in 2008, some truckers had begun parking at the entryway to more rapidly capitalize on incoming business opportunities, but the sheer scale of the new parking lot was surprising.

Mexico’s recent crackdown on border security and drug cartels, which was beginning to be felt when I conducted my fieldwork in 2006 and 2007, contrasted sharply with what border residents continued to experience. As

local, national, and international media, policy makers, scholars, and human rights advocates document increasing clashes among the Mexican military, police, and rival drug cartels, as well as the abuses and deportations of Central American migrants in nearby towns and municipalities, this crossing appeared more open than ever—at least for residents.

The truckers' parking lot physically displayed local monopolization of border commerce. In 2008 border truckers were organizing into an association to control this route and fend off a competing trucking association in Comitán.³² Border truckers perceived this competition as a threat to their livelihoods. One trucker explained, "We are the ones who work here. We take turns to unload whatever arrives here. Truckers have to unload and give us the cargo to transport over the border." Now organized into an association of *camioneros*, or truckers, they visibly assert their right as middlemen truckers in cross-border commerce. They no longer permit long-distance truckers to transport goods directly to Guatemala. They must transfer cargo to local truckers and their cargo loaders.

If residents own multiple trucks, as do Tito's sons Samuel and Gerardo, they become *fleteros*. *Fleteros* are people who own trucks, arrange transports, and rent their trucks to businessmen and smugglers. Being a *fletero* is an increasingly lucrative and often less financially risky business than smuggling. However, risk assessments are changing as residents surmise that drug traffickers seek out local truckers to transport goods. Samuel and Gerardo each own two trucks, which they either drive themselves, rent out, or employ other residents to drive as chauffeurs to deliver merchandise. They distinguish themselves as *fleteros* rather than businessmen, arguing that despite appearances, they do not have enough money to be full-fledged businessmen. Poorer residents see little difference between the two. Samuel earns about US\$80 to US\$100 per coffee truck transport between the border and Frontera Comalapa. When he employs a driver, he pays him \$10 to \$20. *Fleteros* with multiple trucks earn a commission from smugglers and arrange transports without running the risks associated with transport, including interception by officials, banditry, and accidents, because many trucks are old and in disrepair. They earn commissions independent of the price fluctuations of commodities that businessmen face. Chauffeurs tend to be younger nephews and cousins and poorer residents. Samuel's wife is nervous when her husband drives, because a few years ago his truck flipped over near a mountainside. Another time, Tito's nineteen-year-old nephew went on a transport from their

community to Tapachula, which is about a four-hour drive. The boy's mother waited anxiously by the phone for hours with her sister, Tito's wife, until she confirmed his arrival. Businessmen assert that the owner of the product and truck are responsible for the risks and for bribing the officials, but they do not occupy the front lines.³³ Chauffeurs assured me if they encountered officials, they could call the businessman and truck owner to help. However, one instance illustrated the hierarchy of vulnerability.

In one year, in addition to follow up visits, I heard very few instances of violence in an area conducive to illicit flows even though Frontera Comalapa, Mexico, and nearby Camojá and La Democracia, Guatemala, have become more dangerous in recent years. Many smugglers and truckers own guns for protection, and I sometimes heard them go off late at night after drunken fiestas as men shot their guns into the night sky. In general, though, violence was bad for business. Just before Christmas 2006, however, my neighbors in Santa Rosa were discussing some of the negative aspects of living at the border. They told me about a neighbor, Darinel, a chauffeur who worked for Pedro, a border resident who owns four ten-ton trucks and a large dry-goods store and is one of the larger corn merchants. Darinel was shot in the eye while driving one of Pedro's trucks to deliver corn to Guatemala. A few days later I visited Darinel's family.

Darinel lost his eye, but he was preparing to return to trucking. His family was not worried. They believed this was a rare occurrence, one they never imagined could happen. They were not afraid because, as his mother stated, "We do not owe anyone anything." They thought he had been mistaken for someone else. Most residents believe such violence occurs when there is jealousy or an unsettled debt. Some thought he was mistaken for the truck's owner, Pedro. The family could not afford a doctor, but they were grateful to Pedro, his *patrón*, for taking care of the expenses. Like other residents, Darinel's family believes the owner of the truck or product is responsible for any accidents or problems. Darinel's wife reasoned, "Usually there is more danger for them [businessmen] and not for the drivers. The [businessmen] are the ones with money so they are usually the targets." However, Darinel suffered the physical costs.

Vulnerability and Exploitation

Narratives of exploitation are also too simplistic to describe relations between more successful residents and poorer counterparts. Most residents share

kinship, patron–client, and close emotional relationships with local smugglers. Darinel’s family continued to respect and work for Pedro because Pedro fulfilled his obligations as a good *patrón*. Darinel has work, and Pedro maintained his profitable enterprise and respect. Paco’s case illustrates how the contraband economy sharpens and normalizes class differences even as increasingly unequal relatives continue affectionate and economically vital relations. Paco is Tito’s nephew and the son of a landless farmer who works as a field hand and coffee cargo loader for Tito.

Businessmen like Tito help poorer family members and provide employment, but most benefits remain concentrated within the nuclear family (as other family resources are allocated). One Mexican resident related, “Businessmen provide employment . . . chauffeurs, cargo loaders. But most of the money is for themselves.” Businessmen’s children are prepared for more success not only in the extralegal economy, but also in the formal sector. Tito helped his sons purchase trucks, provided them with initial clients, and gave them money to construct their homes, enabling them to become full-fledged businessmen and truckers. None of them felt economically obligated to migrate to the United States. Tito purchased a house for his other children in the capital of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, so that they could attend a private university. He assists his nephews and siblings in different ways that reflect existing relations of patronage between more powerful community members and poorer neighbors and relatives. Community and kinship patron–client hierarchies extend to the contraband sector. Just as Tito employs extended family as field hands and cattle drivers, he also employs them as cargo loaders and truck drivers. They have necessary employment they would otherwise lack, but the type without opportunities for upward mobility. Cargo loaders earn the equivalent of US\$5 per truck, which is the same as a full day’s wage as a field hand. Cargo loaders can load multiple trucks each day, but there are also days and seasons where there is little to no commerce. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the work can be onerous. One girl told me her father injured his shoulder loading corn. He could not load cargo or work his fields for over a month. Trucking and cargo loading enable residents to get by, but the income is not enough to purchase a truck or become a businessman.

Paco did not question these inequalities and defended his relatives’ hard work and generosity, but his experience growing up at the border sharpened his criticisms of the contraband economy. He decided to pursue an accounting degree rather than drive a truck or load cargo like many of his

peers. He saw the illusion of the profits of business; although many tout the success stories, he recounted the risks and those who (especially without smuggler parents to help them) fail. Paco displayed ambivalence about the contraband economy in a limited employment context. His experience demonstrates how individuals negotiate the legal and illegal economy and their benefits and risks.

Paco was left back in school twice, but he persevered to attend vocational high school in accounting in Comitán. He hopes to find a job nearby, although there are few, so he can live in the *campo* (countryside). According to Paco:

I've always liked it here and want to be with my family. Maybe I could work in the fields from time to time and also learn to drive a truck. I would like to get a professional job nearby. When you have one, it is easier to get a loan from the government . . . to build my own house here.

Paco thought it is preferable and more stable to pursue a career, but, to even have the option of entering business, he told me, "You need money and trucks."

Paco could not afford to attend the better high schools and universities in the capital like his cousins—Tito's children and grandchildren. Paco's mother's house was so flooded from the summer rains that she took refuge in a migrant relative's house. We all crouched one August afternoon into a corner of the flooded porch to talk. His mother, once fearful Paco would attempt to migrate to the United States, was proud and, like Paco, believed there were jobs if he persevered. At the same time, he and his mother acknowledged the reality that for many border residents, trucking supplemented the wages of poorly paid professionals. Patron–client relations with wealthier neighbors and relatives could help. Paco reflected:

Some people think business is an easier and faster way to earn more money, but in reality it is not as reliable. Sometimes you make a lot, but sometimes you lose. It is better to have a career, to acquire skills to prepare you for a job. But a lot of people don't think like that and want what is faster and easier. But I think it is also a good idea to learn how to drive a truck, to have that option.

The contraband economy weaves together residents engaged in smaller-scale extralegal activities, border middlemen, migrants, larger-scale smugglers, and families and neighbors. Such interconnections make rendering simple distinctions between illegal/legal, exploitation/generosity, and ethical/unethical problematic although they also help explain why residents

simultaneously unquestioningly support and express misgivings about the contraband economy.

The (Extra)Legal Economy

One particularly hot day, I was walking up hill on the Guatemalan side of the border, and I saw a woman wave and motion for me to come in for lemonade.³⁴ This was my first encounter with Francisca, a loquacious woman with a large heart. In addition to her eight biological children, she adopted two children from migrant women en route from Central America to the United States. As a midwife, she delivered their babies. When their mothers were reluctant to carry the newborns on the journey north, Francisca adopted them and treated them as her own. In the next few weeks, I repeatedly ran into Francisca at soccer games selling drinks and then again at my neighbor's house in Santa Rosa on the Mexican side. This is where I learned that Francisca was a used clothing vendor. However, her business is technically extralegal, because she takes advantage of price and currency differentials by purchasing the clothing at the border in La Mesilla, Guatemala, and using the unmonitored crossing to resell on the Mexican side.

Oppositions between the legal/illegal or between a socially embedded versus a market-based economy are too restrictive to explain how border commerce is embedded in social, kinship, and community relations, as well as how it fluidly intersects with formal economic ventures. Tito and his family smuggle coffee from Guatemala to Mexico, and then companies legally export this coffee to Europe and the United States as Mexican coffee. Without the international border, most of these border smuggling businesses would be legal. Francisca sells clothing door-to-door much like many women all over the world, except that working over the international border renders her work illegal, as well as more profitable. A more permissive attitude toward contraband as a result of local mobilizations in the late 1990s gave Francisca what she calls "the freedom to work." Her case further illustrates how cross-border businesses intertwine with one another and with cross-border social and family networks. Her situation details how, amid intensifying inequalities and the presence of drug trafficking in the region, some residents are beginning to suspect wealthier businessmen of collusion with more illicit actors.

Francisca is an astute businesswoman. She chooses to work in Mexican pesos or Guatemalan quetzales, depending on currency fluctuations and purchasing power. Prior to the late 1990s, when Guatemalan civil patrols and

the military were stationed at the border and various state agents policed the Mexican side, conducting business was difficult. Francisca related that for the past ten to fifteen years she has been more free to work. Recent informal agreements between border residents and regional state agents protect the free movement of border residents (from either side) within the border route up to the Mexican federal highway on one side and the Guatemalan highway on the other. Previously, Francisca either needed a border crossing card (obtainable only at the official crossing for a limited area) or she risked detention. Because of these changes, Francisca's border experience moved from the white monuments marking the geopolitical border to the intersection of the border road with the Mexican federal highway. Both national governments consider her business illegal because she crosses an unmonitored border to purchase and sell goods. She evades inspection, taxes, and documentation. But she sees herself as a vendor who sells to her neighbors. Before officials were removed, however, she was leery about engaging in commerce she considered to be "more illegal."

When she sells clothing in Mexico, Francisca purchases her household necessities with her earned pesos to avoid getting cheated on the exchange. Her husband has experience in construction, but he also works as a cargo loader. Because he earns only about US\$5 for each truck and they lack cultivable land, her income is vital. Through her husband's construction work and cargo loading, her two eldest children's U.S. migrant remittances, her clothing sales, and a small store in her home, Francisca's family struggles to make ends meet. She purchases goods for her store on both sides of the border depending on currency differentials, prices, and availability of goods. Making a living at the border entails amalgamating multiple work strategies that cross legal and illegal lines.

One of Francisca's sons works for her brother, a sugar smuggler. He loads Guatemalan sugar into Mexican trucks for sale in Mexico. In the sugar business, she says, one can "really make money." Sugar businessmen purchase sugar from warehouses in Camojá, La Democracia, and Huehuetenango; transport it to their homes in their trucks; and repackage it in bags from Mexican sugar companies.³⁵ Some, like Emanuel, a successful Guatemalan sugar businessman, work primarily with one Guatemalan company (he works with one company in Huehuetenango but with various buyers in Mexico). Outside his depot, which was his old small cement home, Emanuel employs teenage boys, including his nephews, to use a machine to zipper-seal Guatemalan



Figure 6.2. Packaging Guatemalan sugar into Mexican bags.

SOURCE: Author photo.

sugar into Zucarmex (a Mexican multinational and one of the largest sugar conglomerates in North America) bags³⁶ (Figure 6.2). Mexican border business partners—his main partner is Tito’s son Gerardo—pick up the sugar in their trucks and deliver it to Mexican stores and warehouses that sell the sugar throughout the country and even ship it abroad. Throughout the years, due to kinship, social, and business connections, Tito and Emanuel’s fathers became *compadres* (they are godparents to each other’s children). Now their sons are business partners. Emanuel and Gerardo learned business from their fathers. As Emanuel’s father remembers, “He came with me to deliver corn to the border as a boy. He made his contacts through business and through me.” Emanuel arranges sales with Mexican stores, and Gerardo is in charge of the *flete*, or transport, and arranging bribes with Mexican officials. Although Gerardo is more of a *fletero* (transporter) and Emanuel the businessman who arranges the purchases and sales, both built new two-story homes and purchased ATVs for their sons. Emanuel faces risks when prices fluctuate, but he safely exchanges cargo at his home. In contrast, Gerardo does not deal with

price volatility, but he is responsible for transport risks when moving Guatemalan sugar into Mexico.

Francisca is uncertain how these men recently become relatively wealthy: “They all started out poor like us. In the past few years they all built large houses. Sugar does not [provide] like that.” She lamented that her brother did not help her, and she, like others, was beginning to suspect the real source of his earnings. Yet sugar businessmen attribute their recent wealth to large price differentials between Mexican and Guatemalan sugar and the averted customs taxes. Emanuel insisted it was not sudden wealth that enabled him to build a large house. He asserted, “As a child, we all lived in straw houses. Making money took years of hard work and saving.” He discussed the risks when prices and demands fluctuated. His wife insisted that he invested money wisely and much of it was used to construct their home. Many businessmen and *fleteros* underplay their wealth to maintain notions of respectability, arguing their income is seasonal. In 2008, Emanuel explained his profits in a way that reflected how legal trade dynamics affected the smuggling economy:

The sugar business is good now. The price went up in Mexico since they do not have much sugar because they send it to the U.S. But Guatemala has many mills, and the price is not as high—about [US\$50] a bag in Mexico and [US\$35] in Guatemala now.

Because Emanuel, like Tito, helped his family and poorer residents, he escaped the suspicions levied at businessmen, like Francisca’s brother, who defied community redistributive norms. Emanuel supported his sister’s family after her husband’s death.

Illusory Promises

Most border residents believe contraband benefits them in terms of employment opportunities and the taxes the communities collect at the tollbooths. However, many began to doubt the positive impacts as it became increasingly difficult to establish legitimate businesses not affected by the competition from illegal ones. For example, Nueva Vida’s border tried to open a community cooperative store. The store failed; residents argued it could not compete with stores that supplemented their inventories with cheaper smuggled goods from Mexico. Most smugglers and middlemen like Tito work in smuggling to provide better opportunities for their children. Even the relatively successful often struggle. For most, it was not their desired occupation, nor what they

wanted for their children. Tito was proud that he sent four of his six children to university and two became teachers. However, both struggle to find employment, and Samuel, trained as a secretary in vocational school, left the profession for the more lucrative coffee and trucking businesses. As a secretary, he had to commute to a nearby municipality (or pay rent to live there). He realized he could remain home and earn more money following his father—US\$150 a month in his prior job versus US\$500 a month in trucking. Emanuel sent his son to university in Guatemala City to study business, and he hoped to study in the United States. Francisca laughed when I asked about Emanuel's son's plans to work for a company. Many parents hoped that their work as smugglers could provide a path for their children to earn a degree and enter the formal sector that long eluded them. Francisca told me matter-of-factly about the lack of formal sector opportunities, "Of course he will return and work with his father. He will help *his* business do better!" Guatemalan teacher Fani, whom we met in Chapter 2, related the illusory promise of mobility:

Wilmer [a past community president] worked hard as a [businessman] to send his son to study. He became a teacher and then left to become a cargo loader. He could earn more money. Many study and then realize they can earn more loading cargo.

As profits rise and more long-distance business opportunities present themselves at the border, businessmen are less likely to abide by redistributive norms and, instead, create family monopolies. The change in the past few years from small cement homes to smugglers who build homes that may have pools, indoor bathrooms, high surrounding walls, tiled floors, two stories, and even a few with air conditioning units makes others suspicious of what they perceive to be all-of-a-sudden earnings. When I returned in 2011, one businessman had installed broadband Internet access in his home. One sugar smuggler's older two-room cement home stands in stark contrast adjacent to his two-story pillared home, where he is contemplating installing air conditioning (Figure 6.3). He uses the old house as a depot to store sugar satchels. According to Alonso, a teacher:

It is no coincidence that the drug trade increased in the same three to four years that these houses were built. Sugar cannot be worth that much. These people were poor before. They might be transporting something else. After all, the sugar path [toward Mexico] is the same as the drug route.³⁷



Figure 6.3. A sugar smuggler's home on the Guatemalan side of the border.

SOURCE: Author photo.

Residents prefer not to ask where this wealth comes from. Emanuel's neighbor iterated, "Who knows what his work is? They say it is sugar. He also transports sodas. Maybe it's money laundering. My husband worked in sugar some years ago, but it is risky, and he lost a lot when the peso fell." Under conditions of increasing inequality and secrecy, and as Frontera Comalapa and Huehuetenango become central transshipment locations for the drug trade,³⁸ local terminologies begin to shift from business to contraband. Shaylih Muehlmann documents how hiding drugs among legitimate commerce in trucks is a well-known method of smuggling at the northern border as NAFTA increased truck traffic across the border.³⁹ She details the risk calculus of a trucker who willingly transported drugs underneath his trailers while carrying goods like vegetables on top.⁴⁰ Because trucking was so intertwined with the drug trade, he felt safer knowing what he was smuggling and getting paid for it versus risking the uncertainty of being a "blind mule," meaning that traffickers stash drugs in a truck without the driver's knowledge.⁴¹ At the time, I did not know if border residents willingly did this or ran the risk of being "blind mules," but rumors indicated this could be occurring.

A Fraught Struggle

Border residents like Tito, who once worked harvesting corn and coffee, rather than being consigned to a life of despair or migration appear to contest the economic order that excludes peasants and the poor by positing smuggling as a legitimate economic enterprise. In the context of economic liberalization, the corporatization of agriculture and industry, and crisis in the countryside, the activities of small-scale border smugglers lead us to question designations of ethical, legitimate work. They redefine the smuggling of basic goods as business and challenge the state's role to define legitimate and illegitimate activities based on arbitrarily imposed and policed national borders.

Other scholars argue that informal and extralegal traders can embody a type of grassroots resistance to the exclusions and humiliations of the formal economy.⁴² Gilberto Rosas, in his work with youth at the U.S.–Mexico border, argues that violent youth behaviors constitute a political act of “delinquent refusal” of the conditions of neoliberalism.⁴³ Kathleen Millar, in her work with recyclers, known as *catadores*, at the Jardim Gramacho garbage dump in Rio de Janeiro, however, challenges assessments of informal work as a reactionary form of resistance or as a mere survival strategy.⁴⁴ She stresses the tensions for *catadores* who choose to work on the dump as an alternative to the indignities of waged labor options as they recognize that working on the dump is also “pure suffering.”⁴⁵ She argues that their decisions do not necessarily constitute a form of resistance, or an “oppositional stance”; instead, she posits that *catadores*' strategies are a form of “relational autonomy.”⁴⁶ Working on the dump enables recyclers to respond to the daily insecurities of the poor as well as pursue other social and “life projects,” which constitute a form of release, if not resistance, to the conditions of neoliberal labor available to the poor.⁴⁷ In a neoliberal context where deregulation and the dismantling of protected work have led the formal sector to resemble the informal sector in terms of insecure and low-paid work, the informal sector is no longer a “cushion” for times of economic hardship but may be a preferable alternative.⁴⁸

At the border, smugglers, who largely see themselves as merchants, truckers, and businessmen, sometimes articulate their actions as a form of resistance to the exclusions of the formal economy and trade policies. Yet despite the increase in smuggling in the past two decades, smuggling maintains a strong continuity with economic activities that border residents have relied on to supplement subsistence for generations. Like the *catadores* in Millar's study, the more flexible conditions of work, as well as the embeddedness of

this work in their communities, enable businessmen to engage in smuggling while fulfilling familial and community obligations. Smugglers can work other jobs or farm when business is low, remain home with their families, and incorporate family and friends into businesses. Businessmen express pride in their work, but they also view their work with a degree of anxiety and ambivalence.

Being a smuggler does not necessarily constitute a form of politics or a refusal of the dominant economic system. Nor should smugglers be written off as criminals. Instead, smuggling is a way for residents to stake out a piece of the prevailing economy for themselves and their families amid risk and uncertainty.⁴⁹ Border businessmen may challenge the structures of international trade that exclude them by justifying their own participation through extralegal avenues. However, their actions do not tend to destabilize business as usual nor do they amplify space to address underlying problems of socio-economic exclusion that condition their limited choices. The risks of seizure and arrest are always present even when smugglers have good relationships with officials. Businessmen know that their activities do not necessarily undermine the formal economy, as their work often contributes to prevailing arrangements of capital accumulation and state power in the region.⁵⁰ In contrast to analysts who argue that extralegal activities subvert the state and formal institutions,⁵¹ extralegal activities can also be critical to the state and formal regional economy even as they undermine people's faith in them.⁵²

Taking Contraband Seriously

Border businessmen embody ambivalent positions among the formal economy, the extralegal economy, and their rural communities.⁵³ As residents smuggle coffee for corporate warehouses, they simultaneously contribute to the impoverishment of rural producers by further depressing their prices. Some middlemen and truckers certainly exploit others, but they also provide opportunities for those with little access to employment or market access. Community members rely on Tito and Emanuel for loans with lenient repayment conditions and for economic support. At the same time, the contraband economy offers scant economic mobility. Residents with prior access to land, migrant remittances, political connections, and livestock are better positioned to enter, and succeed in, the contraband economy. Smugglers, as a local elite, often further tie their communities into patronage relationships with corrupt politicians who see little desire for change. Residents express

uncertainty as they see the contraband economy benefiting some more than others. Yet most people still believe they benefit and maintain close kinship, social, and economic relations with these wealthier residents. Businessmen are respected community members as long as they abide by local redistributive norms and community and kinship obligations.

Taking contraband seriously, or understanding the work practices of smugglers from their standpoints and within its particular context, can illuminate how politics of neoliberalism, free trade, and security come together to criminalize and exclude the poor as neoliberal policies also frustrate the state's ability to provide substantive policing and institutional reforms and meaningful and secure employment.⁵⁴ Taking contraband seriously entails not only contextualizing extralegal activity, but also attuning to its effects on shifting individual subjectivities and personal relationships. Even as businessmen exhibit pride in their work and express macho bravado, these same sentiments produce anxiety, uncertainty, and sometimes fear—a fraught and double-edged variant of struggle.

Border middlemen are usually not the winners, but rather their practices end up contributing to existing forms of capital accumulation, rural dispossession, and insecurity in the region. Demonizing middlemen may blind us to who acts, or even pulls the strings, on either side. At the border designations of legality and illegality often serve as lofty discourses, while developing configurations of power and profit may benefit from their blurring.

Recently, residents have directly and indirectly facilitated the growing penetration of illicit enterprises by colluding either directly with drug traffickers to transport their goods or indirectly by turning a blind eye and closing their eyes and ears out of concern for their own safety. Residents seldom spoke directly about drug trafficking, which was relegated to the realm of whispers, jokes, and rumors. Suspicions arose around a large home with a horse race track and multiple cars, residents who attended horse races and hosted cockfights, and others who seemed to have built new homes too quickly and without ever migrating to the United States. Residents occasionally used humor to accuse a friend of being a narco. They grasped the influence of drug trafficking; as a Guatemalan resident told me, “Narcos pass through here, but the people do not pay attention, do not ask, and do not get involved . . . because they will kill you.” A Mexican border resident added, “If there are [or aren't] narcos, this does not interest us as long as they do not bother us.” As Shaylih Muehlmann notes at Mexico's northern border, however, in some areas

dominated by narcotrafficking, it is riskier to abstain than to participate.⁵⁵ Their position leaves them with few choices.

Border middlemen, smugglers, truckers, and everyday residents may benefit from this lucrative crossing, which they describe as their inheritance right based on their residence. But they also bear the risks while larger legal (for example, businesses, state officials) and illegal (such as drug traffickers) players reap unfettered and unblemished profits. It is through rumors, humor, and whispers that residents make sense of their anxieties and ambivalence about the border economy more generally, which may bring more inequality and uncertainty but also access to new commodities and opportunities in a region that has long been neglected.⁵⁶ By following a conflict over the local gasoline smuggling business, Chapter 7 reveals these larger transnational power dynamics into which residents are now inserted.