

Informal transborder trade between Mexico and Guatemala from a permissive border perspective

Comercio informal transfronterizo México-Guatemala desde una perspectiva de frontera permisiva

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Abstract

This paper analyzes processes of interaction, tension, conflict and economic interests in one of the major border areas between México and Guatemala. Informal transborder trade involves several actors who have been building these processes pursuant to agency initiatives. From a conceptual perspective, supported by the dialectical relationship between the notions of a border the behavior of transborder actors, it is concluded that in the study area, an informal border-trade integration process has developed and its actors transcend the border, rendering that border permissive.

Keywords: Mexico-Guatemala border, interactions, tensions and border conflicts, agency, informality.

Resumen

En este documento se abordan procesos de interacción, tensión, conflicto e intereses en la zona fronteriza entre México y Guatemala. En el comercio informal transfronterizo participan actores con cuya agencia despliegan transacciones sociales, políticas, económicas y territoriales, más allá del límite fronterizo. Con base en una perspectiva conceptual sustentada en la relación dialéctica entre la frontera límite como tal y el accionar de los actores fronterizos, se concluye que en la zona de estudio se ha conformado un proceso de integración comercial transfronterizo de corte informal, que en los hechos trasciende la frontera límite para dar paso a una frontera permisiva.

Palabras clave: frontera México-Guatemala, interacciones, comercio transfronterizo, territorialidad, agencia, informalidad.

Introduction

Although it is true that the events of the 1980s led to a mass influx of Guatemalan refugees into Mexico, at that time, Mexico's southern border represented only a space for the Mexican State to manage the flow of persons, goods and services. Following the

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September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and Mexico's climate of narcoviolence that began in 2005, this border has become an object of international interest (Martínez, 2014). These events were incentives for national elites to implement the Merida Initiative,¹ a security program approved by the United States Senate in June 2008, by arguing that unwanted people, arms and drugs could be transiting the border, endangering the national security of the United States of America.

Moreover, at the XIII Tuxtla Summit, held on December 5, 2011, the then-presidents of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica signed a Free Trade Agreement between Mexico and Central America, which was composed of trade agreements between Mexico and its southern neighbors to establish reciprocal security measures. However, according to Rodríguez (2008), it should be considered that trade agreements between countries respond more to geopolitical considerations nested within the subject of national security than to truly economic exchanges. Notably, Mexico signed the following Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Central American nations: a) the Mexico-Costa Rica agreement, valid from January 1, 1995; b) the Mexico-Nicaragua agreement, valid from July 1, 1998; and c) the Mexico-El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras agreement, valid from March 15, 2001 (Foreign Trade Information System [SICE], 2014). Nevertheless, with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), beginning in 1994 there was a *de facto* trade discontinuity between Mexico and Central America, reducing their borders to governing geostrategic positions rather than commercial ones (Ordoñez, 2005).

In effect, beyond border security or trade agreements, and at the margin of the policies of the nation states involved, local agents maintain longstanding processes, configuring a network of transborder interactions such as labor immigration or, as is the case for the subject of this paper, informal trade between adjacent spaces separated by a border. The question to be answered here is as follows: What are the processes of interaction, tension, conflict and economic interests arising from informal transborder trade at the Tecún Umán-Ciudad Hidalgo border? Consequently, this paper's objective is to describe the interactions performed by agents involved in the mentioned phenomenon, whose exercise of agency allows one to transcend the notion of a border and to reach a permissive border.

This paper is derived from research conducted in 2012 in the border and metropolitan area of Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán. Based on the identification of key influential social figures, research was conducted on the subjective aspects of local agents by conducting informal talks, open interviews and field observations related to values, reflections, opinions and behaviors in trade and the transit of merchandise, along with the means of transportation from one country to the other. Using a questionnaire-type card, a series of socioeconomic indicators were generated, such as economic income from labor activities and merchandise volume flowing from Mexico to Guatemala. This paper thus provides not only information from a qualitative analysis, showing the processes of interaction, tension and conflicts associated with the phenomenon in question, but also quantitative information in terms of the economic and labor aspects of the main agents and *camareros*, the economic spillovers of Guatemalan transborder traders to the Mexican side and the monetary income of *retail* and *wholesale* Mexican sellers.

¹ The Merida Initiative was preceded by others initiative that were of great importance to border security, including the "South Plan" and the creation of the High-Level Group for Border Security (in Spanish, GANSEF) between the governments of Guatemala and Mexico (Villafuerte, 2008, p. 198).

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first section is a proposal of the conceptual notions that serve as the basis to address the issues being analyzed; the second section addresses processes of interaction, tension and conflicts among agents involved in informal transborder trade. In the third section, the economic expressions of transactions are described by presenting indicators that measure informal transborder trade. In the fourth section, based on both the initially expressed concepts and other concepts proposed therein, the paper concludes by proposing a theoretical interpretation of the results, which also positions the notion of a *permissive border*.

The conceptual starting point

In the sphere of Mexico's northern border, there is consensus that one of the determinants of the *transborder* is the *geographical contiguity of regions with structural differences* (Alegría, 1989, 1990), which is reflected in a disparity of prices and salaries. Because these regions belong to different national territories, their differences should facilitate the processes of *interaction*, which can be in turn understood as "the behaviors of individuals mutually focused on the objective of satisfying different needs" (Bustamante, 1989). This implicitly means crossing the border in cultural, economic and social terms (Odgers, 2006; Ruíz, 1992; Iglesias-Prieto, 2010). Thus, the *transborder* overcomes economic transactions to address other daily practices permeated with knowledge and experiences that transcend the circumscribed border (Odgers, 2006; Ruíz, 1992). In this interaction, an identity is generated that is distinctive for the border, thus differentiating transborder agents from their respective compatriots (Ojeda, 2009). In this way, the border becomes a resource that is not only economic but also sociocultural, "precisely [due to] the existing differences on both sides of the line...to the contrasts supported by the border" (Odgers, 2006, p. 122).

In this vein, a dialectic relationship arises between the subjectivities of the individuals and the physical border; that relationship is redefined daily, depending on the degree of interaction, the scale of subjective and material exchange, and the frequency and directionality of the crossings, i.e., the degree of *transbordering* (Iglesias-Prieto, 2010).

Grimson establishes that the *transborder* is determined not only by the fusion of cultures and symbolic and material exchange but also by "the distinctions and conflicts, the power struggles, the persistent stigmas and the new forms of nationalism" (Grimson, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). Based on ethnographic methods, that author recovers the notion of *agency* of local agents, understanding the concept as the capacity of influencing changes in one's natural and social surroundings. Thus, it is possible to avoid the generalization that influence only occurs downwards or from the center to the periphery, contrary to the dialectical relationship between governments and border agents. In this way, the *transborder* is redefined day to day based on processes of interaction, tension and conflict among the different agents; those processes "make the border" (Andrade, 2010).

The role of the State is omnipresent in the treatment of borders and has a double meaning: "a) the international border, a limit between states (*border*); b) a flexible space for articulation between systems with heterogeneous socio-economic dynamics where one expands into the other (*frontier*)" (Turner, 1987, Grimson, 2001). Whereas borders are made more flexible in relation to the flows of capital and goods produced

by the elites (frontier), their interactions from below are also restricted, i.e., interactions with local border agents, (border) (Grimson, 2001).

Between the actions of nation states and those of border agents, the borders acquire new connotations, uses and meanings. Those attributes are noted in the study of Dorfman and Cardin (2014), who note that in the borders in the Southern Cone, where civil society constructs networks that activate a border, state and private territories coexist.

Other contributions from the South include the interesting essays of Renoldi, Benedetti and Salizzi, along with those of Albuquerque, whose contributions address the variations among the countries that comprise this vast region. Renoldi (2012) analyzes the border of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil and concludes that for border agents, the border simultaneously presents itself as a *resource* and a *limitation*. The idea of limitation makes sense in that borders are a reality, even when they are social constructs: "Each person lives the borders as an experience of relations capable of going beyond customs or migration control which become but an aspect of everything which populates these spaces" (Renoldi, 2012, p. 137). Benedetti and Salizzi (2011), who study the various metropolitan areas of the Argentina–Bolivia border, identify an overlap of territorialities, some that are fixed and others that are mobile; some that are marked by relations of horizontality and others that are marked by verticality; they are either routine or permanent, they are old, modern and post-modern, they are either purely symbolic or instrumental and their interactions can extend through geographic areas that are either large or small. Finally, Albuquerque (2010) compiles and analyzes historical studies of Brazil's borders conducted by Holland's Sergio Buarque. For the purposes of this study, it is only possible to underscore the different uses employed by that historian with respect to the concepts of frontier and the front of expansion related to Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 findings. The distinction is that whereas the expansion of the North American border occurred by means of war waged against the original inhabitants of those lands, in the case of Brazil, this expansion occurred through close cultural contact between the colonizers and the aboriginal population (Albuquerque, 2010).

Scholarship related to the framework of the Mexico–Guatemala border is essentially based on the work of two individuals: Jan de Vos and Andrés Fábregas. The former created a history of the various times of border expansion as part of an expansion front from pre-Hispanic times, to the colonial period and to the recent economic projects on the Mexican side of the border. He thus notes that the second meaning of the word border (frontier) has greater heuristic value in explaining the submission of not only the Chiapas Maya but also their Guatemalan compatriots (De Vos, 2002). Fábregas likewise tours the formation of the southern border based on three of the Mexican State's large expansion projects: the annexation of Chiapas (1824), the establishment of coffee plantations and lumber camps based on border treaties with Guatemala (1882) and the agrarian project of Lázaro Cárdenas and accompanying indigenous expansion toward the Lacandon jungle (Fábregas, 1996). The still-usual conceptualization of Turner, revisited by De Vos and found implicitly by Fábregas, enabled the implementation of this perspective into the analysis of Guatemalan refugees to Chiapas in the wake of the counterinsurgency war of the Guatemalan State. Thus, Kauffer (2005) uses these concepts to analyze first, how the Mexican government has considered the southern border to be a priority national-security area since the arrival of Guatemalan refugees in the 1980s, with Mexico's concern reflected in an increased security presence in the region (border); and second, how the refugees broadened the agricultural border as a concomitant fact of their arrival (Kauffer,

2005). As shown, there remains research to be conducted related to the multidimensionality of Mexico's Southern border, beyond the analysis of its transborder component and based on distinct interpretative frameworks.

To address this subject matter, the above-mentioned approaches from Mexico's northern and southern border areas, as along with those from the Southern Cone, are far from being contradictory. Indeed, according to the object of this study, these approaches are complimentary. For example, the concept of *border* (Turner, op. cit.), in addition to its classic use as a line dividing two national territories, is useful when analyzing how it performs as to support the contiguity of two regions with price and salary differences, thus validating the notion of the *adjacency of structural differences* (Alegría, 1989, 1990, 2007). In this way, these spaces are economic and social dimensions, simultaneously providing reasoning for the actions of agents, who conduct a prior evaluation of what exists on the other side of the border (Ruíz, 1992) and what can be used or (where applicable) appropriated by them.

With the deployment of actions by local agents, the notion of *border* has been overcome with a transcendence to the notion of *permissive border*, such as the margins of tolerance that national states concede according to political and economic circumstances in their border regions; these either are a product of historical evolution or are implemented circumstantially given the agency of the border agents, and may become everyday practices of an indefinite term.

The concept of *permissive border* addresses border situations that transfigure these spaces with the passage of time, molding them into a dynamic and flexible territory that is porous because the State—whether due to action or omission—has shown some degree of acquiescence.

According to Bustamante (1989), we understand the concept of *transborder interaction* as the behaviors of individuals mutually focused toward others with the objective of satisfying different needs, where these individuals flow across the border, coming and going across the border. In the same way, based on the work of Ruíz (1992), we define border agents' *knowledge valuation* as their analysis of the implied cost-benefit of crossing the *border* to conduct their own activities.

In this way, while simultaneously maintaining the concepts of the *border* (Turner, op. cit.), the concept of *permissive border* is developed in the fourth section, taking into account the polysemic capacity of the border in its polyhedral version as both a *resource* and a *limitation* (Renoldi, op. cit.), the *territorial uses* (Sack, 1986) deployed by various agents and the *overlapping of territorialities* (Benedetti and Salizzi, 2011), which through interaction result in the generation of a new conceptual notion for understanding of some of the phenomena occurring at the Mexico-Guatemala border.

Processes of interaction, tension and conflict

The municipalities of Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán comprise a single urban area solely differentiated by the Suchiate River, which serves as the international demarcation. According to census sources, there is an estimated population of approximately 62,491 residents in the area: of these, 35,056 live on the Mexican side (INEGI, 2010) and 27,435 on the Guatemalan side. To this second number, we should add 20,000 to 25,000 people who comprise the flow population because Tecún Umán is an important stop for immigrants not only from the entire Central America region but

also from Latin America and Asia,² who use it as a dormitory town before crossing over to Mexico. In all of the municipalities along the Suchiate River, informal transborder trade³ can be observed but without a doubt, the area with the trade of a truly *transborder nature* (Iglesias-Prieto, 2010), measured by the quantity of merchandise and number of agents participating in it, is the urban area of Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán. This zone contains six informal crossings where merchandise is transferred between Mexico and Guatemala: “El limón”, “Los Rojos”, “El Palenque”, “El Cascajo”, “El Coyote” and “Las Hamacas” (Figure 1), in the order of their importance with respect to the intensity of the flow of goods and persons.

Transborder Guatemalan traders (hereinafter *transborder traders*)⁴ can be observed in the border area every day from early morning until approximately 5:00 PM. Because quetzales (the Guatemalan currency) are not accepted in the trade establishments of Ciudad Hidalgo, these agents look for support from *Guatemalan moneychangers*,⁵ who generally discover the price of the quetzal when buying it in Guatemalan banks or through deliberately displayed advertisements. Because of the parity of the Mexican peso and the quetzal with respect to the US dollar, the Guatemalan currency from the 1990s has seen better performance than the Mexican peso. Thus, in 2012, 100 Mexican pesos bought 60 quetzales, which undoubtedly was one of the primary reasons that Guatemalans shopped in Mexico. Once the currency exchange has been performed in Guatemala, the transborder traders head directly to the Suchiate River to cross to Mexico, finding the *camareros* on the banks of the river.⁶ If the transborder traders do not cross the river with a trusted *camarero*, they look for him when they reach the Mexican side; he then knows that he will later receive goods purchased in Mexico that he must store for their transfer to Guatemala. This latter fact indicates the existence of interactions between Guatemalan traders and goods-crossing facilitators based on stable bonds created by trust, which leads us to the social condition of informality (Portes and Haller, 2004).

Transborder traders, located on the Mexican side of the river, go to the area where the main suppliers are present—i.e., the retail and wholesale suppliers⁷ with whom the traders have more interaction. Because transborder traders do not buy in only one store but instead compare prices and/or search for something that is not available at a specific place, after having purchased from the store owners, the latter send the merchandise—with the help of *rickshaw drivers*⁸ to the *camareros*, i.e., to the river, to the places of the different crossings where the goods will be kept and subsequently transported (Figure 1).

² www.miniayutla.com

³ Informality is defined by us as the social condition in which economic activities are developed, which activities are not regulated by state intervention but instead governed by mechanisms based on mutual trust, solidarity or threat of social exclusion if socially established labor norms are transgressed (Portes and Haller 2004).

⁴ Cross-border Guatemalan traders are people who purchase basic industrial goods in Mexico to sell them in a particular area in Guatemala.

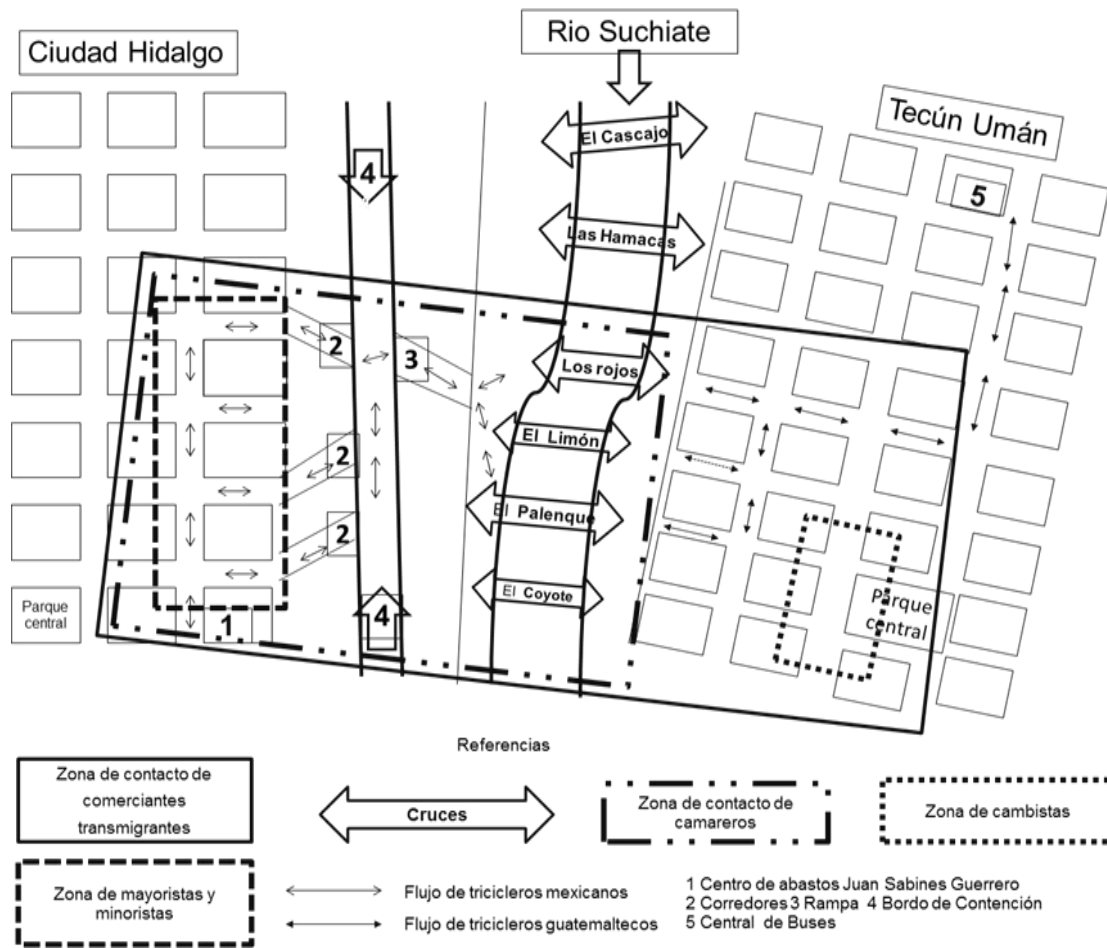
⁵ Moneychangers trade currencies professionally; and they can be either Mexican or Guatemalan. In this case, we speak of Guatemalan moneychangers based in the Guatemalan town of Tecún Umán.

⁶ Servers transport goods and persons across the Suchiate River without officially registering their movements. They use two tractor tire chambers—which is how they received their Spanish name, *camareros*—over which they place a wooden platform, thus creating a type of raft (see Figures 2 and 3).

⁷ The Mexican retailers and wholesalers are the store owners in the town of Ciudad Hidalgo.

⁸ The tricycle riders are employees of the wholesalers and retailers, and their profession consists of loading and transferring merchandise using the work tool from which they receive their name: the tricycle. It is worth noting that the tricycle is a very common means of transport among the inhabitants of the border area, and there are various tricycle rider unions in the region. However, the tricycle riders studied here are not registered union members, and they have no association to support them in labor and legal matters.

Figure 1. Transborder socioeconomic dynamics in the Tecún Umán-Ciudad Hidalgo area



Source: Authors' research based on field observations. April 2012.

Upon reaching the banks of the Suchiate River, the *rickshaw drivers* state the name of the purchaser, and the merchandise is immediately received and retained by the trusted *camarero*. Meanwhile, the *transborder trader* continues his purchases. We next encounter a new agent, a tricycle rider who is involved in interactions between the storeowners and the *camareros*.

Once the purchases have been completed, the transborder traders return to the Mexican bank of the Suchiate River to wait for their final provisions while the *camarero* places the products on the platform. Afterwards, the trader, sitting on his merchandise boxes, is transported to the Guatemalan side of the tributary, where the *camarero* unloads the purchases and thus finishes his work. Immediately, the transborder traders and their products are transported by *Guatemalan rickshaw drivers*⁹ to the

⁹ Guatemalan tricycle riders are workers who belong to a professional union.

Tecún Umán bus station, and from there to various locations in Guatemala. The *Guatemalan rickshaw drivers* are also protagonists in this interaction.

In some cases, transborder traders arrive with their own vehicles or hire pickups and trucks with a loading capacity of three to six tons, which they park on the Guatemalan side.

At the “Los rojos” crossing on the Guatemalan side, there is a group of 20 people who provide merchandise-transfer services. In the jargon of the area, they are called *pickuperos*, an adjective derived from the type of van that they use. From the above, we can determine the existence of two more social agents on the Guatemalan side who are active in the transborder trade.

Camareros

The *camareros* are perhaps the most important link in the operation of *informal transborder trade* in the studied urban area. Due to their communication with *transborder traders*, the mobile telephone has become a work tool because with its use, the traders occasionally request that the *camareros* purchase and send merchandise for them, before cash changes hands. Although sending merchandise only occurs occasionally, cellular communication is used constantly to communicate not only the offer or existence of products but also any other unknown factor related to the border. For this reason, mobile-telephone communication creates virtual interaction between product demand and supply and provides a more dynamic setting for transactions due to prior knowledge provided by telephone communication between Mexican shopkeepers and transborder traders. It is among *camareros* and transborder traders that we find the strongest social network, notwithstanding the fact that their relationships are strictly professional: if merchandise is misplaced or becomes unusably wet, the *camareros* are forced to pay for it. This could be a point of tension between both groups of agents despite their longstanding interactions; although their interactions are based on a certain degree of trust, those interactions essentially occurs through reciprocal instrumentalization between the protagonists.

An even more acute point of tension and conflict consists in separating the *camarero* from his post and work instruments. The majority of *camareros* must pay 50 quetzales daily to the post owners. The payment will only be waived for three main reasons: a) if you are the founder of the crossing where work is being done; b) if you are the heir to the founder of said crossing; or c) if you have purchased the position rights from the founder. It is worth noting that some owners have more than one post, a situation that is common enough that there is an oligopoly among not only the owners of *camarero* locations but also the owners of chambers.

Another tribute disbursed by the *camareros* (regardless of whether they are founders) from different crossings is rent for their chambers and rods (the instruments they use to move across the river) in the amount of 40 and 5 quetzales a day, respectively. This tribute is paid to people dedicated to the purchase, rent and maintenance of these tools: the *camareros* simply rent them, with the rent payment deducted from their daily income. That is, *camareros* and chamber owners are two subgroups of independent agents who relate to each other through the rental of the *camareros'* instruments.

The social representations perceived by the *camareros* are another source of tension because they assume that they have been catalogued by the Mexican and Guatemalan

authorities as criminals or at least as untrustworthy due to suspicion of their involvement in the informal transfer of goods and people from one side of the border to the other. One of the requests that the *camareros* have made to the governments of both countries is that they “be treated with dignity”; they state that their occupation “is to work without caring what is in the boxes or any other package whose owners are the traders” and not their own. This contrasts with the trust between the *camareros* and cross-border traders because only based on that trust it is possible to develop the activities of information, merchandise purchase, safekeeping and transfer.

Each crossing has its own organization and regulations that make interaction processes possible. The internal labor organization of the “Los rojos” and “El palenque” crossings is similar because both were founded approximately 40 years ago. These crossings are then subdivided into two work groups—the Mexican and Guatemalan shifts—that are divided by alternating the work days covered. Both shifts are represented by an assembly, which engages in internal conflict resolution. The assemblies meet every month to address issues arising out of workdays, organizing the cleaning of work areas, providing monetary cooperation to rent the spaces where they congregate and contributing to a savings fund to help with loans in the event of a labor accident. These activities are without a doubt proof of their initiatives of agency because despite the informal nature of the assemblies’ activities, they contribute to the social reproduction of the organization, which allows them to position themselves as an organized group not solely recognized by the public administration but also by other agents, primarily groups from other crossings.

To exercise control and avoid conflicts during the workday, the members of each shift register on a list whenever they arrive at their bases, i.e., at the end of each transfer. In this way, they have a successive order that allows everyone in the group an equal opportunity to conduct the same number of transfers. The bases, where the *camareros* wait for their clients, are located on both sides of the Suchiate River. At the “El palenque” crossing, there is more discipline in the control of the list because each member must take charge of it for an hour and write down the number of persons and merchandise transported by each *camarero* on each trip. This is because each one of them has the right to earn up to 50 quetzales (Q.) per crossing, thus avoiding a situation in which they could out-earn their colleagues. Accordingly, there is more equality at the El Palenque crossing in the distribution of clients and income.

In contrast to the two above-mentioned crossings, at the “El limón” crossing, the management members have a single authority because they are the owners of the *camareros*’ plazas. Within this group, the person with most power is doubtless a woman who is the owner of at least 15 chambers joined to various crossings. She is also the owner of the locations of those chambers. This crossing does not have a Mexican and Guatemalan shift as at “Los Rojos” and “El palenque,” only a group of 45 *camareros* of both nationalities who can work all week long. Out of the 31 surveyed, five (16%) worked five days a week, 14 (45%) worked six and 12 (38%) worked from Monday to Sunday.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of *camareros*—91%—are Guatemalan (from various parts of the country), whereas the remaining 9.0% are Mexican. Of the Guatemalan *camareros* subgroup, 27 (30%) are from the following locations: Catarina, Coatepeque, El triunfo, Malacatán, Mazatenango, Pajapita, El Tumbador and Reforma, whereas 54 (61%) are from the urban area of Tecún Umán. The Mexican *camareros* are primarily from Ciudad Hidalgo, the other part of the urban area.

Retail, wholesale and the Mexican government

The transborder traders find their primary suppliers among the Mexican retailers and wholesalers whose businesses exist thanks to Guatemalan demand. These retailers and wholesalers are owners of family stores who count on the helps of their spouses and sometimes children. A noteworthy point about the retailers and wholesalers (as with the *camareros*) is the use of the cell phone to constantly communicate with the *transborder traders*: 13 of the 16 retailers surveyed have a cellular telephone with the Tigo company and one has a cellular telephone with Claro, whose primary coverage is in Guatemala. Fortunately for them, the telephone companies' coverage extends beyond the border and reaches various points in Ciudad Hidalgo. The remaining two retailers use a cell phone from Telcel, which operates in Mexican territory. The use of cell phones stands out as an instance of a node of a network between Mexican store owners and transborder traders, making the trip more effective for the latter because they have prior knowledge about the existence and cost of particular goods.

Each wholesale and retail business is governed individually by the decisions of its owners; except when something affects everyone, which is when both groups look to their committee of representatives. However, the *wholesalers*, due to their greater economic weight, have the voices to create an organized group with legal representation, primarily due to situations like the one described below.

When the historic Hurricane Stan arrived in 2005, the wholesalers and retailers were located several meters from the Mexican bank of the Suchiate River, very close to the various crossings. Their properties, warehouses and products were affected and their establishments were temporarily closed. However, when the water level returned to normal, the agents returned to their locations. Six years later, in 2011, retailers and wholesalers were relocated by the state government to a supply center that Juan Sabines Guerrero constructed especially for them, using the justification of the prior meteorological event. Furthermore, the state government, together with the National Water Commission (in Spanish, CONAGUA), began to construct a levee to "safeguard" the inhabitants of Ciudad Hidalgo against the threat of another hurricane.

The constructed levee greatly affected the transfer of goods from Mexican stores on the bank of the river and therefore, the Chiapas government issued a promise to Mexican storeowners that it would construct a ramp at the "el coyote" crossing (Figure 1) to facilitate the transfer of products. Nevertheless, by the end of Juan Sabines Guerrero's (2012) term, this promise had not been kept. In 2012, the relationship between the wholesalers, retailers and the rest of the transborder agents with the Mexican government was bad because the ramp had still not been constructed. Thus, many storeowners evaded placement in the new supply center, unilaterally installing themselves on the streets and avenues that were the most accessible to the *camareros* area and where the *rickshaw drivers* could take the merchandise. This caused a split between the unsatisfied owners and those who had accepted relocation.

In January 2013, the most dissatisfied agents used improvised vehicles to travel to the riverbank and sell their products. Under the circumstances, they are only able to rent houses to serve as warehouses in the streets and avenues close to the *camareros'* locations.

The problems caused by the construction of the levee were of such significance that according to local media, even entrepreneurs from other Mexican states who sell products in the border area experienced a sales decrease, joined the protests of the

border agents and threatened to stop providing basic products to local traders. In the case of José Luis Fernández of the company Productora Nacional de Huevo (in Spanish, CRÍO), from Mérida Yucatán, sales plummeted by 60% during the two months of conflict caused by the construction of the levee (Scott, 2012).

Finally, after various protests, the Mexican government and border agents (wholesalers, retailers, rickshaw drivers, *camareros*, etc.) went to the negotiating table during the first half of 2013. The State agreed to construct, both a ramp by the “Los rojos” crossing and roads, thus overcoming the physical barrier imposed by the levee (See Figure 1.)

However, there remained latent tension between retailers and wholesalers because the rickshaws of those who decided to stay in the supply center had to cover a longer distance, thus increasing maintenance costs and the salaries of the *rickshaw drivers*.

As discussed above, tension and conflicts of a specific nature and scale are notable. The first of these events occurred when the State intervened and constructed the levee, a situation that remains latent. The second event is the division caused by the market made especially for retailers and wholesalers because everyone made relocation decisions (i.e., either accepting relocation or relocating close to the river on their own initiative) based on their own interests, defining the most convenient way of trading their products.

The economic dimension of informal transborder trade

To describe some important aspects of the economic dimension of the Tecún Umán-Ciudad Hidalgo urban area, it is sufficient to consider the economic and labor aspects of the *camareros*, the economic spillover of Guatemalan transborder traders on the Mexican side and the monetary income from retail and wholesale sales.

As we have said before, the majority of *camareros* must pay rent for their workstations. Of the 89 survey participants, 65 (73%) pay 50 quetzales per day, whereas 24 (27%) do not pay. On average, each *camarero* earns 386 quetzales in weekly net monetary income, which is equivalent to 640 Mexican pesos (according to the exchange rate during the fieldwork).

The *camareros*' main clients are the transborder traders whose activity is fundamental to economic life in the study area. Of the 89 *camareros* surveyed, 70 (79%) have returning customers and 19 (21%) work with clients without preference for any particular customer. The 70 *camareros* discussed work with 325 returning transborder traders who visit the border on a regular basis. With respect to the volume of merchandise that they transport for their clients, the *camareros* could only offer information about approximately 192 (59%) of the 325 clients mentioned. These 192 traders transport 224 chamber loads¹⁰ worth of products to Guatemala per week.

The jargon of the area refers to loads as follows: a half chamber, a $\frac{3}{4}$ chamber, chamber, a two- to three-story chamber, a three- to four-story chamber, etc. To transport these loads, depending on the type and volume of the merchandise involved, the *camareros* charge from 30 to 250 Quetzales in the summer; because of the difficulty of passing the current, they charge more in the winter. The most frequently

¹⁰ In the trade jargon, a chamber load is the measure used by servers to quantify the amount of merchandise transported (Figures 2 and 3).

transported volume is a two- to three-story chamber. For example, in Figure 2 we observe 50 boxes of eggs whose unit cost during our stay in the area was 380.00 Mexican pesos, which equals a total product cost of 19,000 Mexican pesos. Regardless of the type of product, the average value of the merchandise transported by a camarero from one place to the other ranges from 15,000 to 35,000 Mexican pesos.

Figure 2



Figure 3



The transborder traders transport industrial products of different presentations and brands to Guatemala, including the following categories of goods: (1) Basic foodstuffs, such as eggs, maize, bean grains and canned beans, salt and rice; (2) Various foods, including soya, cooking and instant pastas, ¼-liter bottles of water, liquid milk and milk powder, yogurt, flour for tortillas and bread, oil, cookies, instant coffee, mayonnaise, canned chili peppers, canned sardines, sausages, bottled soft drinks, and beers, among others; (3) Personal hygiene and household products, such as toilet paper, toothpaste, hand soap and washing powder, liquid aromas and chlorine; (4) Instant purchase and catalog-order shoes; (5) Plastic utensils, including toppers, cable for television sets and electrical installations; (6) Candles; (7) Tubes for drainage, sanitation, and various supplies; and (8) Seasonal fruits and vegetables, such as mangos, papayas, oranges, melons, onions and tomatoes.

If the minimum amount for a chamber load (15,000 Mexican pesos) it is multiplied by 224 transfers a week, there is an economic spillover of 3,360,000 pesos a week from only the 192 *transborder traders* for whom there are records, indicating that this is just a portion of Guatemalan consumption.

On average, retailers receive a sales volume of 345,916 Mexican pesos per month, with a range from 11,000 to 1,260,000 pesos. On average, the 16 retailers on average have staffs of five people who are loaders or *rickshaw drivers*; the size of the retailers' staffs ranges from one to 35 workers. In all, the 16 retailers employ 80 people. Because there is no information about the wholesalers except for that provided by their leader, we can only state that the sales of this group are from 100,000 to 200,000 Mexican pesos a day per business. According to the leader, *informal transborder trade's* sales in Ciudad Hidalgo amount to 2,000,000 pesos per day.

In summary, the Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán urban area is an integrated economic and social exchange area that is fundamentally based on the axis created by informal transborder trade. This activity creates a series of agents linked by different degrees of interaction to the practices, conflicts and tensions that produce a border environment. There are both first-degree interactions and second-degree phenomena. The first-degree interactions are those in which the agents identify with shared codes such as the following: a) the codes of the Guatemalan transborder traders and the *camareros*; b) the codes of the transborder traders and the Mexican retailers and wholesalers (store owners); c) the codes of the Mexican store owners, who are faced with different governmental issues associated with territorial regulations of their establishments. The second-degree phenomena include the following: a) the Guatemalan and Mexican rickshaw drivers with their respective clients: transborder traders; b) phenomena occurring within various groups of *camareros* grouped by crossing; and c) phenomena related to a group with other *camarero* groups. In each of interaction, there are conflicts that generate tension, some to a lesser degree (transborder traders and *camareros*) and some to a greater degree, which are permanent or indefinite. The permanent tensions are inequality in access to resources such as positions (collecting dues) and renting work instruments (chambers and rods). The indefinite tensions include the unexpected intervention of the Mexican State through the construction of the levee, which created tension not only among the Mexican storeowners and with the government authorities but also among other involved parties in transborder trade, including the retail and wholesale groups.

Final interpretation essay

The urban area of Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán is not only a place through which undocumented migrants pass but also a place that sees strong social and trade activities, as revealed by its interactions and volume of economic transactions. In the context of the Mexico-Guatemala border, a high level of transbordering occurs (Iglesias-Prieto, 2010) and the studied area stands out as hosting the greatest concentration of transborder contact. This contact is the product of both adequate geographical and demographic conditions and greater land and satellite interconnection, which enables a communication network. The concentration of transborder contact is also due to the cultural and historical continuity existing among the inhabitants of the Mexican and Guatemalan border towns. These conditions have configured a dynamic trade area, powered by the constant supply and demand for basic industrial products from which various interactions are derived, involving a diverse range of actors, who interact both physically and electronically through cellular telephones.

The social practices of various agents are conducted prior to their valuation (Ruíz, 1992); those who begin the phenomenon (transborder traders and Mexican store owners) show us that adjacent structural differences (Alegría, 1989, 1990), enable them to make instrumental use of the border. Through their agency, the Guatemalan transborder traders permeate the border (Turner, 1987) with a prior valuation of the utilities to be obtained, whereas their Mexican counterparts invest even though the size of the urban area market is small, knowing that with the help of intermediaries (transborder traders), their products will reach beyond the border. The other relevant protagonists are the *camareros*, whose prior valuation of their importance in the transfer of people and merchandise, regardless of national origin, involves territorial conduct on both sides of the river notwithstanding the border. For the above, it is important to include the understanding of *territoriality* and its argumentative value when we develop the notion of the permissive border. "Territoriality is defined as the intention of an individual or group to affect, influence, or control persons, phenomena and relationships, defining and reaffirming control over a geographical area" (Sack, 1986, p. 26).

With borders understood as both a *resource* and a *limitation* (Renoldi, 2012) in this case, there is an opportunity (resource) that arises out of the adjacent structural differences to not only use the available human capital (*camareros*), its means of transport and communication from one country to the other, but also the difference in the exchange rate. However, although there is a territorial use of particular spaces, the presence of the State becomes a limitation. This is a reality made evident when it exerts its institutional power and intervenes to apply the perspective of its own public policy through the territorial reorganization of established trade and the construction of levees, creating a supply center and exerting corresponding pressure to relocate on store owners, thus affecting the trade logistics of every step involved. Consequently, we agree with Grimson (2003) that the role of the State should be considered when redefining the border areas because the activities of border populations may be directly affected by government decisions.

Our thesis related to the proposal of a *permissive border* is based on the notion of *overlapping territorialities* from Benedetti and Salizzi (2011), together with the definition of territoriality as stated above. In informal transborder trade, there are at least three key agents and their respective agencies that define their spheres of influence and control in their relationships, bounding and reaffirming a geographical

area. These agents are as follows: the State, the camareros and the Mexican store owners.

With its sovereign claims, the State establishes its territorial limits in their role of border and thus deploys unilateral dispositions. However, even in the presence of institutional dispositions and control, there remains a margin of tolerance that is territorially permeated both by the influx of Guatemalan camareros into the national territory and by the agency of Mexican store owners in the disposition of spaces. By occupying the national margins of the Suchiate River and inserting themselves into the Mexican municipality, the primarily Guatemalan camareros make territorial uses of the border space, exclusively bounding this activity to those who have been formally recognized by their management rules. That is, the territorial agency of the camareros occurs not only against the Mexican State but also among those who make up their union by establishing with extreme precision their various transborder crossing routes and the safekeeping of positions for the transfer of goods and persons, be they purchased, rented or inherited, functioning as a filter for potential candidates. Finally, the Mexican storeowners use their agency to evade government dispositions and, acting territorially, establish a struggle for space. Previously, the store owners did this in spaces close to the camareros, and now, evading an obligatory situation, they deter the State by refusing to occupy a state territory represented by the supply center and by instead occupying new territories that normalize the transborder routines.

Therefore, in the Mexican space of Ciudad Hidalgo, a territory contained in the limits of the National State, there are overlapping territorialities whose explanatory center can be found in the simultaneous nature of agencies deployed by agents in relation to informal transborder trade. Territorial overlapping, as has been shown, resides in the parallel existence of territorial actions, the first nested in the formal legitimacy of the National State, which deploys actions according to its scope in terms of the border. The two remaining factors are the deployments of agent actions motivated by self-interest, some with smaller claims (the camareros), other with medium claims (retailers), and still others in a situation of capital accumulation (wholesale store owners).

The *permissive border* was formed not only by how the above-mentioned agents intervened but also, as has been mentioned, by the Guatemalan transborder traders who use informal crossings to develop their activities. Without using territorial space, the Guatemalan transborder traders enter and leave Mexican territory without registration, engaging in transactions and interactions with different protagonists question on a daily basis. The actions of the three last agents (camareros, store owners and transborder traders) is based on the absence of a conceptualization of their border condition because they define their reason for being in a border contiguity in reference to uses and customs that arise out of a common heritage. Their societies are established in a geography that historically brings them together, with limitations and opportunities, daily reproducing a closeness that is not only sociocultural but also emotional. The permissiveness of the Mexican State also refers to the margins available for national local agents' actions, i.e., those of the Mexican storeowners. These conscious interactions indicate the state's interest in providing dynamism to the regional economy, incentivizing profits not only for store owners but also for certain commercial links of the Mexican economy in general.

The combination of the above conclusions paint a picture of this space of the Mexico–Guatemala border as a place where the processes of immediate history converge, as has been the case with the consolidation of this integrated transborder market, defining itself as a social dimension (Grimson 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Iglesias-Prieto,

2010; Odgers, 2006; Ojeda 2009; Ruíz, 1992) shaped how various protagonists “make the border” (Andrade, 2010). The border agents “make the border” not only with labor practices but also (and above all) through their agency, inducing processes of change according to their interests.

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