

1 Introduction

Jesús was the first *frutero* I visited regularly and befriended.¹ He was one of the thousands of street vendors who, on a daily basis, fanned out across the city of Los Angeles and became part of the urban landscape (see figure 1). Fruit vendors (*fruterros*) in the city are distinctive.² They work behind large pushcarts weighed down by many pounds of produce and ice under rainbow-colored umbrellas (see figure 2). On their street corners, *fruterros* prepare and sell made-to-order fruit salads.

Jesús was clearly perplexed at my presence in the beginning; I asked too many questions, and I stood too close to him because his infrequent and soft-spoken responses were barely audible above the constant din of street traffic. At five feet six, he was two inches taller than me, but he never stood straight, so we were mostly at eye level. He was twenty-one years old when I met him in 2006. He was slender and dark skinned with a wispy mustache and goatee. His standard uniform included dark wash, loose-fitting jeans with arabesque tan stitching over the back pockets and an equally loose-fitting black hoodie. Jesús never looked directly at me. He always kept his eyes directed down at the waist-level tray table where he prepared fruit. Oftentimes while talking, he would wipe a wet rag across the cutting board and tray table to busy his hands and give



Figure 2. A frutero working in central Los Angeles.

his downward gaze a purpose. Jesús sold made-to-order fruit salads on Pico Boulevard.

Pico Boulevard runs from downtown Los Angeles all the way to the coastal city of Santa Monica. Standing along it, one is visible to thousands of passing motorists and pedestrians. Fruit vendors work out of large and heavy pushcarts; through the Plexiglas tops of these pushcarts, customers can see and pick which fruits and vegetables they want to include in their prepared-on-site fruit salads. Service is always quick: less than three minutes after making a selection, customers have a clear plastic bag or cylindrical plastic container of chopped fruits and vegetables in hand, garnished with salt and chili powder, with a plastic fork sticking out and inviting the customer to dig in.

One day, after two weeks of almost daily visits, I was late leaving campus and arrived at the vending site after the 3 p.m. school pickup rush. When I approached, I saw that his pushcart was nearly empty. “I almost thought you weren’t coming today,” he told me. “I don’t have any good fruit left.”³ My favorite items were also the most popular: watermelon, cantaloupe, pineapple, and mango. He offered to prepare a bigger-than-usual fruit salad with the less popular leftover items: cucumber, coconut,

papaya, and on this occasion, oranges. I agreed. I came for the conversation, not for the fruit.

“Do you work every day?” I asked.

“I keep bank hours,” he replied and then laughed at my puzzled face. With his knife he gestured toward the bank he was standing in front of and said that he worked six days a week, with reduced hours on Saturdays, and was closed on Sundays.

“Are the bank customers your customers?”

“Some of them. I can give them smaller bills after they visit the [ATM] machine. But I get school kids and people who ride the bus and people going to work.” With his chin he motioned to a passing bus behind me. A westbound bus making local stops brought a steady stream of people every twenty to thirty minutes during off-peak hours. I rode the bus to get to Jesús’s corner as well. The Big Blue Bus, a bus system based out of the city of Santa Monica, would leave me half a block past the bank where he worked, so I often saw him through the large bus windows tending to customers as I arrived.

Throughout the following weeks, I varied my arrival times to get a sense of Jesús’s workday. Some days, I arrived late and helped him put things away; other days I arrived early and watched him set up. The days were routine and mundane, and when Jesús did not have customers, he texted friends and family on his phone. He talked about getting bored often and explained that he was trying to learn how to nap while standing up. Figuring out successful leans to achieve this became part of an ongoing conversation.

It took many visits before I felt comfortable talking about issues related to immigration status. The topic eventually came up when Jesús asked me, “Do you have legal status papers?” I explained that I was born in Texas to Mexican immigrant parents. Jesús was from a small, rural town in the Mexican state of Puebla and had arrived in the United States only a few months before I met him. Though he had entered into the country without authorization, he knew he had a job waiting for him as a fruit vendor. A former neighbor in Puebla who now lived in Los Angeles had promised him the job. Jesús had a wife and two young children in Puebla. He intended on returning to them just as soon as he made enough money to pay for his wife’s medical bills. During each of my visits, I would learn something new and interesting about Jesús and his job.

One midweek day after a couple of months of visits, the bus I was riding passed the bank, but there was no sign of Jesús. I thought I might stay aboard to visit other vendors further along the boulevard but decided to walk to his corner and ask the parking lot attendant if he knew anything about Jesús's absence. Along the curb next to the sidewalk where Jesús usually parked his pushcart, I saw a melting pile of crushed ice.

Had I just missed him? Why would he leave so early in the day? It was the Salvadoran parking lot attendant who answered all of my pressing questions. The health department had done a "sweep." They had dumped Jesús's produce into large trash bags and, before taking the pushcart, had asked him to dump out all of the remaining ice onto the sidewalk.

"Did they arrest him?" I asked, thinking immediately that it could be related to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I was told Jesús had been given a ticket and was picked up by some of his friends right after the incident.

"I don't understand," I said, trying to make sense of all the details.

The attendant shrugged and said bluntly, "It is illegal to be a street vendor."

At that point, I had no sense of how crackdowns worked or how often they occurred. I was immediately full of questions: If vending was illegal, how did street vendors reconcile their occupation's public and conspicuous presence with an illicit activity's need to remain private and hidden? Was the money that vendors made sufficient to counterbalance the loss of income from a crackdown? Could the items confiscated be recovered? The questions I had that day only scratched the surface of the complicated relationship street vendors have with the city. This was further complicated when other actors—like business improvement districts, neighborhood associations, and street gangs—became involved. What proved even more interesting was the *paisano* network that helped fruit vendors withstand this and other assaults on their economic and social wellbeing. Though a *frutero* works on a street corner alone, he is often part of a large network of *frutereros* who are also his *paisanos* (hometown associates).⁴ In this way, he is not alone.⁵ It was the complicated web of relations within that *paisano* network that captured my sociological imagination.

While *frutereros* are ubiquitous in the city, few know much—if anything—about them. This is an account of their lives as migrants, as

workers, and as members of an ethnic community.⁶ This is a story about immigrant adaptation among entrepreneurial newcomers in a hostile context of reception. The presence of *fruteros* on street corners throughout the city represents a confluence of larger social and economic forces. *Fruteros* are labor migrants who have crossed international borders in search of improved economic opportunities. Because most of them are undocumented, they confront obstacles that prevent them from legally participating in the formal economy. However, they are socially networked into the informal fruit vending occupation through strong hometown ties. These hometown, or *paisano*, ties come to define their work and personal lives in the United States in powerful and meaningful ways.

Migration scholars have long documented how newcomers lean on their community of *paisanos* for assistance on arrival. Immigrant social networks and the social capital that they provide to their members are important sources of support in the lives of newcomers.⁷ Yet the experiences of *fruteros* reveal that immigrant social networks are not only sources of support overflowing with social capital that benefits all members equally. They can also be overwhelmed by the economic poverty of their members and by the hostile context of reception in which they exist. In addition to being a source of support, these networks can also facilitate exploitation. To capture this complexity, these pages include stories of stability and insecurity, of settlement and return migration, of ethnic solidarity and exploitation. They demonstrate that *paisanaje* (compatriotism) functions as much more than a social safety net. In this book, I argue that it is more useful to think of *paisanaje* among immigrants in the United States as an ethnic cage. This concept is the theoretical contribution of this study. The context of reception gives the ethnic cage its form; the individuals within give it its function.

THE ETHNIC CAGE

A popular *ranchera* song by the *norteño* group Los Tigres del Norte is called “La Jaula de Oro” (The Golden Cage). The song is narrated from the perspective of an undocumented immigrant who is painfully aware of the freedom that he has lost in coming to the United States. “Of what use is

money,” he sings, “if I am a prisoner in this golden cage?” The ethnic cage concept presented in this book is meant to echo this song’s sentiments.⁸ It speaks to the struggle found in the dual nature of something and provides a useful way of understanding the harmony and conflict found in the ethnic community of *fruteros*. For some, the ethnic cage is large, invisible, and functions to corral community while keeping threats at bay. For others, the ethnic cage is small, visible, and functions to confine the individual when that same community does harm. Yet as I show throughout this book, the ethnic cage can serve different functions at different times for the same individual because personal, social, and work relationships are dynamic.

The powerful symbol of the cage is a familiar concept to ethnographers. Carol B. Stack began her classic study *All Our Kin* (1974) with an excerpt from Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The excerpt, and the study that followed, conveyed the richness of giving and receiving in the context of desperate need. Like Stack, I examine the relationship between reciprocity and poverty. She looks at this relationship among black families who are internal migrants, moving from the rural American South to the industrial Midwest, whereas I focus on Latinos who are international migrants, moving from rural Mexico to an urban American West. Stack finds cooperation and mutual aid among kin; I find this to be true among *paisanos* as well, but I also find suspicion and exploitation. This community of *fruteros* presents a case in which both cooperation and mutual aid exist alongside exploitation. Like others before me who stumbled on unsavory aspects of immigrant life, this is not the story I set out to record.⁹ Fieldwork over several years revealed how structural hardship inspired ingenuity among *fruteros*, but this ingenuity often helped and harmed fellow *paisanos*. In the years I spent among *fruteros*, I saw both the promise and the pain of community.

Social networks matter. They can structure how the poor survive economic destitution and how newcomers integrate into a new country. Indeed, precariousness is a condition for which social networks can provide assistance in the form of resources. Social networks, however, are developed and utilized within structural contexts. W. E. B. Du Bois (1899) was among the first American sociologists to identify the use and benefits of robust social (e.g., mutual aid organizations) and kin networks among Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward residents. Du Bois maintained his focus on

the social conditions that created the economic precariousness of the Seventh Ward residents. Similarly, Cecilia Menjívar's (2000) work on Salvadoran immigrant networks focuses on the hostile immigration policies, limited economic opportunities, and resource-poor community that make the rendering of aid conditional and uneven. She found that for Salvadoran immigrants in the Mission District of San Francisco, it was the hostile context and the limited resources that prevented networks' members from helping each other.

For *frutereros* in Los Angeles, structure matters—these informal workers must continuously navigate a hostile context of reception. As undocumented immigrants working in the informal economy, these street vendors confront laws that prohibit their presence *and* their work. In many ways, this context contributes to their economic precariousness. Yet where the Salvadoran immigrants in Menjívar's study failed to open doors to newcomers because there was no help to be given, the Mexican immigrants in my study opened doors to newcomers both to offer help and to exploit. This is the ethnic cage. Newcomers are not turned away. Their *paisanaje* grants them entry, but it does not guarantee benevolence.

WHY FRUIT VENDORS?

"Working on the street, like this, is starting at the bottom," Cristian, one of my main respondents, originally from the small town of Dos Mundos in the Mexican state of Puebla, explained on one of the many days we sat and waited for customers while watching people and cars go by.¹⁰ Throughout my time in the field, it was not uncommon to hear of vendors working on street corners as *frutereros* just days after arriving in the country. At the end of the workday, as I rode through town in a pickup truck with Cristian and his girlfriend, Carmen, originally from Mexico City, hauling their pushcarts to the storage warehouse commissary (known by vendors as the *comisaria*), they would honk and nod to their fellow *frutereros* working on the street corners we passed. Carmen always followed each encounter with a quick description of the person for me: "That guy works for Raúl, he's been here for a few weeks"; "That one doesn't know how to hold the knife yet 'cause he's new"; or most often, "He just got here, he's from Dos

Mundos too.” Although I did not select this population of workers knowing they would be such recent arrivals and be working in an occupation dominated by *paisano* connections, these characteristics proved to be important when scrutinizing the impact of social networks.¹¹

To be sure, street vending has a long history among recently arrived immigrants. The Library of Congress has thousands of images of street peddlers in turn-of-the-century New York City, and among the top subject headings for the photographs in this visual repository is the term “ethnic neighborhoods.” Looking through these black-and-white images of peddlers in the Syrian Quarter, Little Italy, and Little Jerusalem continuously reinforces the connection between immigrants and street vending. The overrepresentation of immigrants among street vendors is observable in the modern-day vendor membership of New York City’s Street Vendor Project, a nonprofit organization providing legal representation and advocacy to street vendors. In Los Angeles, another major metropolis that, like New York City, serves as an immigrant gateway, street vendors are also representative of the many recent arrivals to the country. Yet while New York has an estimated twenty thousand street vendors selling food, flowers, books, art, and other products, in Los Angeles there are an estimated fifty thousand street vendors, ten thousand of whom sell food products.¹² These significant numbers should not obscure an important characteristic that made Los Angeles distinct from New York City. Throughout my time in the field, Los Angeles was the largest American city that prohibited street vending.¹³ This prohibition often resulted in the confiscation of products and pushcarts, the issuing of fines and citations, and at times, arrests. It was the risk associated with this informal occupation that made the use and abuse of ethnic networks so widespread and meaningful. And it was this prohibition—whose impact I saw almost immediately—that solidified my interest in understanding the social world of *fruteros*.

CRIMINALIZING IMMIGRANT STREET VENDORS IN LOS ANGELES

Many laws structure fruit vendors’ presence on street corners, and these laws in turn structure the social and economic relationships vendors have

with others and with each other. Citywide crackdowns on street vendors conducted primarily by the health department—known by vendors as *salubridad*—contribute to the marginalization of the vendors, and fear of crackdowns structures vendors' relationships. I conducted fieldwork among fruit vendors from 2006 to 2012. Throughout that time, there was an overarching law in the Municipal County Code that prohibited vending on sidewalks within the city of Los Angeles. More broadly, street vendors were subject to scrutiny, citation, and arrest based on laws and regulations from various city, county, and state agencies.¹⁴

Enforcement within the city was carried out by three agencies: the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the Los Angeles Department of Public Works (Bureau of Street Services), and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH). Prior to 2014, vendors could receive citations from and be arrested by Los Angeles Police Department officers for nuisance or littering violations in addition to illegal vending citations. In 2014, the Attorney Administrative Citation Enforcement (ACE) program was implemented, which provided a noncriminal enforcement approach to nuisance abatement. The ACE program issued administrative citations in place of criminal citations or arrests for quality-of-life offences, which included illegal vending. The administrative citations issued by ACE could be resolved through the payment of a fine, with no resulting criminal record, probation, or threat of jail, but it did not entirely remove the threat of arrest.¹⁵ Because fruit vendors sell food products, they are also subject to California Health Code regulations, which are enforced by the LACDPH. Health inspectors could confiscate pushcarts and products during their crackdowns. Street Services investigators from the Department of Public Works also carried out enforcement of sidewalk vending violations. These strict antivending ordinances and the corresponding crackdowns were a perpetual risk to vendors, whose livelihoods and public presence are continuously contested.

In addition to being bound by local and state-level policies, those fruit vendors who were undocumented were also subject to federal immigration laws that prohibited their presence in the country. Los Angeles has long been considered a “sanctuary city” for undocumented immigrants due to policies like LAPD's Special Order 40. This police mandate was implemented in 1979 and prevents LAPD officers from questioning

individuals for the sole purpose of determining an immigration status—a measure meant to establish trust between officers and the city’s various immigrant communities. While there is no clear definition of a sanctuary city, cities that define themselves as such tend to follow certain practices that protect resident undocumented immigrants. The term generally refers to cities that do not allow municipal funds and resources to be used to enforce federal immigration laws. Of course, there is no true sanctuary for immigrants residing in the United States without legal permission.

Cities are neither wholly inclusionary nor exclusionary. Even in cities that vow to protect immigrants, there are limits to the protections that they can provide.¹⁶ The tension between inclusion and exclusion is the defining feature of immigrant “illegality” in the United States. The strict binary between “legality” and “illegality” misrepresents the reality of immigrants’ lived experiences (Kubal 2013; Menjívar 2006) and ambiguities within the law itself (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012). Thus, scholars use terms like “legal ambiguity” (Coutin 2003), “semi-legality” (Kubal 2013), “liminal legality” (Menjívar 2006), and “illegal citizenship” (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012) to capture the complexity surrounding unauthorized immigrants’ formal exclusion under federal immigration law and their partial inclusion as residents entitled to certain legal rights and protections.

It is important to note that local policies, not just federal laws, can be used to police and displace immigrant populations.¹⁷ Within Los Angeles, sociologist Ivan Light has documented how local government has disrupted unwanted immigration by enforcing antipoverty legislation. Enforcement targets activities that include “sweatshops where low-paid work violates wages, health, and safety regulations and slums that violate municipal housing ordinances” (Light 2006, 10). Although Light focuses on immigrant workers operating in the wage economy, the local quality-of-life policies and enforcement activities he investigates also heavily target street-based workers like *fruteros*. These enforcement activities include crackdowns carried out by the LACDPH and the LAPD, which target vendors operating in violation of city and county ordinances that regulate sidewalk activity and public health and safety. Light argues that this local political intolerance of immigrant poverty prompted crackdowns that, in turn, contributed to the deflection of immigrants to other U.S. cities.

There are, of course, many undocumented immigrants living in Los Angeles who did not leave, and many others have continued to arrive as enforcement and surveillance increased. This book focuses on one such group of workers and how they persisted in the midst of this federal and local government assault. While Ivan Light argues that poverty intolerance provoked crackdowns, I argue that the crackdowns themselves contributed to and perpetuated poverty and marginalization among *fruteros*. It was this hostile local context of reception that helped give the ethnic cage its form. Among the survival strategies vendors employed to counteract the hostile context was a heavy reliance on the *paisano* network. Yet the *paisano* network could both provide help and exacerbate harm—this is the dual nature of the ethnic cage.

TIES THAT BUILD, TIES THAT BIND

The positive functions of social networks, especially among newly arrived immigrants, have received much scholarly attention. Within studies of international migration—between Mexico and the United States in particular—social networks are routinely found to ease entry into the new country and reduce the short-term costs of settlement (Browning and Rodriguez 1985), facilitate job acquisition (Bailey and Waldinger 1991), perpetuate migration patterns (Massey and Espinosa 1997), and promote remittance practices (J.H. Cohen 2005). The fruit vendors' hometown social network offers some benefits: it directs migrants to Los Angeles—an immigrant metropolis—and once they arrive, it steers them to work in the street-based fruit vending business. The role of migrant social networks in that process is not novel. Previous studies examine how Mexican immigrants use social networks to acquire jobs in particular industries and create immigrant labor markets (Fitzgerald 2004; Mines and Montoya 1982). However, this book moves beyond how immigrants get jobs using their immigrant social networks and instead focuses on how those social networks both build and bind the *paisano* community.

It is important to recognize that a focus on only the positive functions of immigrant social networks can be problematic for several reasons. First, this flattens complex narratives. Relationships between people are

complicated and dynamic. It is unrealistic to assume that ties between individuals offer only benefits, especially when vulnerabilities related to context of reception, immigration status, class, and gender are present. In this book, I unpack immigrant social networks and understand them outside of a context in which they only promote or ease immigrant incorporation. *Paisano* social networks are constantly changing. They offer different individuals within the network uneven benefits, and they can be simultaneously helpful and exploitative. The ethnic cage concept is meant to capture this complexity. Although cages evoke a negative connotation, it is important to remember how, in a hostile context, such a cage can serve as a protective barrier. A diver in a shark cage can feel the protection of her enclosure even as it confines her movement.

To be sure, scholars have addressed the negative functions of ethnic social networks (see, for example, Gold 1994; Kim 1999; Mahler 1995; Smith 1996). Yet whereas scholars such as Cecilia Menjívar (2000) and Carol Stack (1974) explain the negative effects of social networks as a consequence of the dissolution of these networks or their inability to render aid—something generally attributed to a lack of resources or information as a result of a hostile context of reception—I argue that these negative effects can also be a result of the actual constitution of the networks. For fruit vendors, *paisano* networks do not dissolve due to a lack of resources; rather, they are structured to both render aid *and* facilitate exploitation. Among fruit vendors, individuals are not alienated or denied assistance; instead, migrants are invited or even recruited to come to Los Angeles, and they work with the expectation that they can, at least initially, be made to do so for little to no pay.¹⁸

The concept of the ethnic cage also complicates the ethnic enclave model. According to sociologist Alejandro Portes, the ethnic enclave consists of “immigrant groups [that] concentrate in a distinct spatial location and organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market and/or the general population” (1981, 291). Fruit vending is an informal immigrant business that operates within a larger Latino ethnic enclave.¹⁹ The purpose of the ethnic enclave model is to explain how immigrant and ethnic groups thrive on the basis of socially embedded, small entrepreneurship and avoid a secondary labor market characterized by low-paying, low-skill jobs with high turnover rates that lack opportunities for promo-

tion. The ethnic enclave model captures how immigrants create and promote industry within their communities, even when facing racist or xenophobic hostility, and attributes it to ethnic solidarity. Ethnic solidarity manifests itself through immigrant social networks (Portes and Bach 1985). This solidarity in hostile contexts of reception allows coethnics to come together and associate, create ethnic markets, and then form ethnic enclaves in which ethnic businesses “organize themselves to trade exclusively or primarily within the enclave” (Zhou 1992, 4).²⁰

However, because the ethnic enclave model is meant to explain immigrant attainment, it obscures the exploitative undercurrents that may also constitute it. In attributing the formation of the ethnic enclave to ethnic solidarity, the model ignores the self-interest and opportunism that may guide certain actors and glosses over the exploitation that limits other network members’ aspirations to upward mobility. In a critical review of the ethnic enclave model, Jimmy M. Sanders and Victor Nee note the need for “detailed analysis of the actual pattern of exchange between bosses and workers within immigrant enclaves . . . before generalizations can be made about ethnic solidarity’s effect on the socioeconomic mobility of workers” (1987, 765). This study responds to that call and examines the power dynamics that underpin the underresearched occupation of street vendor labor in the predominantly Latino community of Los Angeles. It highlights the experiences of immigrants upon which enclave businesses are built and presents a case in which exploitation by fellow *paisanos* contributes to downward mobility and return migration. Here workers are forced to recognize their low status not only in the new destination country but also within a newly constituted hierarchy of hometown associates.

Through the case of the *frutereros*, this book complicates our understanding of social networks by looking at what they provide and to whom. Expanding on the scholarship of others, I focus on the impact of undocumented status (N. Rodriguez 2004; Saucedo 2006), gender (Hagan 1998), power differentials between workers and bosses (Cranford 2005), and the structure of opportunities in the receiving context (Menjívar 1997). Local policy can contribute to creating a hostile context of reception for recent immigrants, which has a domino effect that impacts opportunity, network relations, and immigrant integration. The law, at both the federal and the local level, entangles immigrant vendors so that webs of social relations

must continuously contend with it. In the chapters that follow, I show how social networks simultaneously benefit and exploit—how they help integrate newcomers and fuel return migration. My aim is not to refute the benefits of immigrant social networks—they are perhaps the most important factor in the successful integration of recently arrived newcomers. Instead, I provide a multifaceted account of immigrant network use across time and within a tightly knit community of *paisanos* to show how it becomes an ethnic cage. Within this ethnic cage, members can become trapped by both the benefits and the mistreatment through a dynamic that enables and constrains them.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

I gained entrée into the fruit vendors' social world slowly by visiting individual vendors working in distinct neighborhoods throughout the city. I had awkward initial interactions and extended conversations with many vendors in much the same way that I did with Jesús. In the beginning, I spent time hanging out on corners with individual *frutereros*. I varied my arrival times to see different parts of their day. Within weeks, I was helping various *frutereros* pack up at the end of the workday and accepting rides to bus stops. These rides helped me meet vendors who worked together and gradually expanded my snowball samples.

The majority of fruit vendors that I approached were young, Spanish-speaking, Latino men because this demographic was overrepresented among *frutereros*. They were also primarily from one small town in the Mexican state of Puebla that I call Dos Mundos.²¹ A few vendors were from Guatemala, but there was much more turnover among those young men. Although I am fluent in Spanish, my accent and diction are from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands; this contrasted with vendors' southern Mexico accent and diction. I would often ask for clarification on the meaning of certain words or expressions, and this allowed the vendors to embody a mentorship role. Other aspects of my biography helped as well. As a first-year graduate student at UCLA at the time of my research, I was new to the city and did not have a car; as a result, the vendors often took me under their wing to ensure that I did not get lost.²² All of this made me

realize how much being a stranger in a strange land resonated with them and allowed me to inadvertently tap into their charitable side.

When approaching young Latino men in the field, it helped more than hindered me to be a young Latina. I was nonthreatening, though sometimes vendors would jokingly ask if I was a covert health inspector. It helped that I had an abundance of enthusiasm and displayed interest in their lives; the job itself also had a fair amount of downtime in which to talk. Occasionally, I would have to shut down flirtatious talk, though I never pretended to have a significant other to curtail it. I did not want these interactions to circle around a lie. However, despite the many connections I made with male fruit vendors in a male-dominated field, it was a young woman, Carmen, who became my greatest resource and ally. She was one of three key informants who functioned as a social network hub, introducing me to various other vendors and giving my presence more credence.²³

Carmen was nineteen years old when I met her in 2006. She had been in the country for three years at that point. She was high-spirited, with a soft, sweet way of talking that made conversation easy. Yet she was no one's fool and used barbed language to cut down belligerent customers and territorial business owners just as easily. She was from Mexico City but was dating Cristian, a vendor from Dos Mundos, and was well connected to his *paisanos*. Carmen introduced me to other vendors and was the first to entrust me with her pushcart and to invite me to her apartment for dinner, where I met her roommates, who were also vendors. She routinely recruited vendors for me to interview and, after years in the field, would refer to me as her cousin (*prima*) to any outsider who inquired about my presence.²⁴ Throughout the six years I spent in the field, she dated three fruit vendors from Dos Mundos, and I was able to spend time with them in social settings—as a third wheel.

I took notes while hanging out, and after about a year I began carrying and using a small digital recorder. After spending some time with vendors, I began to ask for formal interviews outside of work hours; I provided financial compensation for these sessions because they typically took over an hour and required meeting up late in the evening.²⁵ Over half of these interviews were with vendors from Dos Mundos or from the surrounding vicinity (but who considered themselves Dos Mundos *paisanos*). I may have oversampled Poblanos (people from the state of Puebla), but