

Paqueteros and Paqueteras: Humanizing a Dehumanized Food System

Abstract: In this article, I argue that *paqueteros* and *paqueteras* humanize an increasingly dehumanized food system, connecting people and places culturally who are divided by borders and food policy. Their activities constitute an important, while underacknowledged link between migrant communities and the places they came from, largely operating informally and without governmental support, although not without official scrutiny. Building on two decades of ethnographic data, I explore the

practices and significance of *paquetería*, informal package deliveries, in the context of US-Mexico food policy after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, recently renamed the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement) and an increasingly globalized food system that systematically marginalizes and excludes human-scaled food production, processing, distribution, and consumption in favor of industrialized, corporate food.



FIGURE 1: Customer receiving goods from a paquetero in the Bronx, December 2016.

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Introduction

WITH HIS MINIVAN PACKED to the roof, Samuel negotiated the winter streets of New York City. At a stoplight, he paused to send a WhatsApp message to his next recipient, “I’m getting close. Can you come downstairs in 5 minutes?”¹ A few minutes later, he pulled up in front of a vinyl-sided two-family

home in Eastchester, Bronx, and again sent a text message, “OK, I’m here.” As he slid open the side door of the vehicle, products shifted in a chaotic jumble inside the minivan and he consulted his pencil-written notes on a sheet of graph paper, probably torn from one of his children’s school notebooks. Two brothers came out of the front door together, shook hands with Samuel, and exchanged news about their

hometown. The brothers, like many of Samuel's customers, received on that day dried chiles, ground pumpkin seeds, and some *mole* in a plastic container. In spite of the wintry chill, they had big smiles on their faces when they shook hands again with Samuel and headed back inside. Samuel continued on his rounds.

Over the course of the morning, Samuel would deliver most of the contents of his van, negotiating the complex street grid of the Bronx with a fluency many New Yorkers might envy. He described the things that people request the most: chiles, ingredients for *mole* as well as prepared *mole*, and herbal remedies. Over time and journeys like this one, Samuel became very familiar with the routes to the homes of his customers, routes that he drove monthly all the way from Santo Tomás Tlalpa,² in the state of Puebla, Mexico. Samuel is a *paquetero*,³ an informal courier, specializing in delivering goods between family members divided by borders. Like many *paqueteros*, his clientele are mainly residents of his town and their family members who reside in the New York City area, especially the Bronx and East Harlem, although occasionally he has served customers in the West, Midwest, and the southern United States, and municipalities surrounding his town in the Mexican state of Puebla, and towns in Guerrero and Tlaxcala States. He has driven trucks from Nebraska to clients in Mexico, transported a puppy across the border at Brownsville, Texas, and even delivered his niece and nephew from the Bronx to Santo Tomás Tlalpa to visit their grandmother.

In this article, I argue that *paqueteros* humanize an increasingly dehumanized food system, connecting people and places who are divided by borders and food policy. Their activities constitute an important, while underacknowledged link between migrant communities and the places they came from, largely operating informally and without governmental support, although not without official scrutiny. Building on two decades of ethnographic data, I explore the practices and significance of *paquetería*, in the context of US-Mexico food policy after the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (recently renamed the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement) ushered in an increasingly globalized food system that systematically marginalizes and excludes human-scaled food production, processing, distribution, and consumption in favor of industrialized, corporate food.

Materials and Methods

This article focuses on *paqueteros* and *paqueteras* operating between the state of Puebla in Mexico and New York State in the United States. While *paqueteros* operate under other

names and between other locations in Mexico and between Mexico and the United States, and between other countries in North, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean, I focus only on a subset of US-Mexico *paquetería*. I have conducted research with Mexican communities in New York City and in Puebla and Oaxaca States since 2000, and this article is based on data collected between 2006 and 2016 under two separate studies approved by the Institutional Review Board at Lehman College of the City University of New York. I began studying the consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on health and food systems in Mexico in 2014, and pursued new ethnographic research in multiple sites, including Mexico City, the Mexican states of Puebla and Quintana Roo, and New York City. While *paquetería* was not the primary inquiry of my research, I found myself observing and interacting with *paqueteros* consistently throughout each transnational research study I have conducted with Mexican migrant communities. I conducted participant observation and informal interviews with people in communities who specialize in *paquetería*, including one family in particular, Samuel's, while also observing *paqueteros* on every trip I took between the United States and Mexico City from 2008–19 (approximately ten trips). Additionally, in 2019, I was asked to serve as an expert witness in a federal case involving a *paquetera*, as I describe below.

Of the extended family I describe in this article, Samuel and his partner, Elena, never migrated but continued to live in the same house with their children, while his sister María Pacheco and her husband, Raúl, live in the Bronx. I have known the family since 2001 and have worked closely with them on all of my major research projects.

What Is *Paquetería*?

What do *paqueteros* and *paqueteras* carry? How do they secure their customers? How do they do their work? *Paqueteros'* livelihoods depend on occupying a niche between the formal and informal spheres of transport of goods and food provision.

Historically, migrant families have always sought food-stuffs from their communities of origin, within and across national boundaries. Scholars have chronicled this for many different groups in a variety of locations. Gutmann (2006) describes the ways that migrants from rural parts of Mexico to the capital in the mid-twentieth century relied on goods brought from the countryside to meet their food needs in the city. While migration to the city was part of a larger project for

social and economic mobility, and provided access to greater purchasing power, low wages and marginalization meant that many families continued to experience food insecurity. Such food insecurity was partially alleviated by periodic infusions of staples (especially dried corn and beans) brought to the city from relatives still farming in the countryside. Viladrich and Tagliaferro (2016) describe the brisk market for “nostalgia” foods among Latin American migrants in New York City, as well as the “nostalgic inequality” experienced by those who must make their lives in landscapes of food oppression that do not meet their needs (Viladrich 2017). Altobelli (n.d.) recounts how Italian migrants insisted on foods familiar and even imported from Italy, despite critiques by policy makers and social workers prompted by the migrants’ attachment to culinary practices from their communities of origin.

Caribbean migrants often organize transport of goods using ships, with courier services, as well as charities organizing for transport of shipping containers filled with barrels of goods for family members or survivors of natural disasters (Golash-Boza 2014). And Philippine migrants call the crates that they fill with goods to ship back to their families from destinations around the world *balikbayan* boxes, with the term *balikbayan* referring to someone or something who has “returned to the country” (Fresnoza-Flot and Pécoud 2007; Burgess and Haksar 2005; Camposano 2012).

People traveling have always carried goods for those who cannot or do not travel. Wilkerson (2011) vividly describes an African American family traveling on a train from South Carolina to New York City transporting sweet potatoes in a suitcase during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. Heaving the heavy suitcase onto a rack, the Pullman porter asked what in the world was in it. He was told it contained “clothing,” but as the journey continued, the potatoes, still covered with dirt, escaped from the suitcase and rolled all over the train car, causing hilarity and the porter’s joke, “Your clothing seems to be rolling around under the seats” (p. 296).

Every college student boarding a Greyhound bus with a family member’s chocolate chip cookies or sweet potato pie is a kind of *paquetero*. So was my friend Alicia, who in graduate school would take the subway from NYU to her grandmother’s apartment in Brooklyn for regular care packages of her Puerto Rican *pasteles*. A Dominican student I taught at Lehman College told me her grandmother arrived every Christmas from the Dominican Republic with a suitcase full of sweet potatoes and squash for her holiday cooking with her migrant children and grandchildren. The grandmother considered excess baggage fees a small price to pay for sweet potatoes and squash from home. My mother-in-law would spend hours before traveling from Chile to New York

individually placing *aceitunas de Azapa*, olives from the Valley of Azapa, into the neck of a two-liter Coca-Cola bottle to bring to my husband. An Italian friend, Nicola, has been known to carry an entire suitcase full of cheese and *prosciutto* back to New York City from Rome.

It is well acknowledged that migration can produce homesickness for certain foods. Often those foods are associated with special occasions and ceremony, and are likely to be foods that are labor intensive—in the Mexican context, such foods are *mole* or *tamales*—as opposed to everyday foods or foods that are easily replicable in the location of settlement (Gálvez 2018; Viladrich 2017). Pérez (2014) chronicles the ways that gendered kinds of socially reproductive labor around food preparation and transmission of knowledge about *cocina*—foodways and cuisine—contribute to strengthening the bonds of kinship and culture. In addition to foods like *tamales* or *pasteles* having many ingredients, they often require multiple steps in preparation, and rely on knowledge from someone, often a matriarch, who safeguards family recipes and techniques for preparation. While such foods might be ubiquitous in the home country and the location of settlement (foods like Dominican *habichuela con dulce* can be obtained year-round in New York City, even though in the Dominican Republic it is typical only at the holidays; *pasteles*, *quipes*, and *tamales* can be purchased from a large number of street vendors and storefronts all over New York City), people often consider their own family’s preparation methods and favor profile to be special and not replicable. When Samuel was distributing goods to his clients in the Bronx, he noted, “Here in the Bronx,” sweeping his arm around him, “you can get a lot of these items now. But they don’t taste the same as they do back home.” In fact, arranging to obtain foods from the place of origin via a *paquetero* may give foods as much or more meaning than attempting to replicate them in the place of settlement.

Samuel, like many *paqueteros*, largely delivered food, crafts, and home remedies from South to North, and consumer goods (sneakers, electronics, speakers, tools, and appliances) from North to South. He often traveled over land and specialized in delivering vehicles (usually North to South). He became extremely familiar with the three-day journey overland from Puebla to New York State. The foods he was asked to bring most often included dried chiles, bread (especially festive breads like *pan de nuez*, a walnut bread associated with the Christmas holidays in his region), conserves of fruit, pumpkin seeds (whole or ground), dried hibiscus (*Jamaica*) flowers, wood ash (for nixtamalizing corn, explained later), dried herbs and spices (Mexican oregano, avocado leaf, epazote, Mexican cinnamon), dried and ground

corn (in many colors including blue, red, white, yellow), sweets typical to the region (such as *camotes*, *muegano*, *alegrías*), salts (mineral salt and artisanal salt harvested in his home community), and home remedies (dried herbs, lemon grass, teas, roots, bark, etc).

Unlike those who carry goods for their own personal consumption, *paqueteros* make a living connecting people divided by distance. I argue that the importance of informal food couriers in a community will vary depending on the following factors: (1) recentness of migration: recent migrants are more likely to desire foods imported from their home community than those born in or residing in the United States for a longer time period; (2) mobility: whether or not recent migrants are able to freely and frequently travel between their communities of origin and their locations of settlement will determine whether or not they can replenish their own literal and metaphorical pantries with nostalgia foods or must rely on others to obtain such goods; and (3) the extensiveness of formal purveyors of key ingredients and foods: the longer a migrant population has been in a place, the more likely it is that there will be shops and restaurants specializing in meeting the demand for ingredients and prepared foods from the community of origin, while the more recent the migration, there may not be sufficient clientele to make such a retail or *paquetería* business viable.

As we will see below, the conditions listed above are applicable to the Mexican community in New York City and contribute to the important role played by informal food couriers. Mexican migration to New York City is relatively recent, but still numerous enough that *paqueteros* can find significant numbers of clients with origins in any number of rural Mexican hamlets. Mexican migration to New York City has occurred in a context of very limited mobility. Most people did not migrate with a legal status permitting free movement and thus, after migration, they have found themselves immobilized both by their legal status and by low wages (Bergad 2013; Castillo Planas 2020). And third, while in the last ten to fifteen years small Mexican groceries have proliferated in some parts of New York City,⁴ it can still be difficult to obtain very specific and local ingredients or foods prepared according to the microspecifications of a single rural community. Further, some of the goods sitting on grocery shelves may seem less fresh or of dubious origin to customers than items brought directly by *paqueteros* from their communities of origin. For these reasons, as we explore below, *paqueteros* have played a very significant role connecting people to their communities of origin and filling desires for nostalgia foods.

Migration to the New York City metropolitan area has led the Mexican population to grow from about 30,000 in 1980 to

more than a half million today, 577,054 (Bergad 2019). Since the economic recession in 2008, however, Mexican migration to the United States has tapered off (Passel et al. 2012). Because there has been no immigration reform in more than three decades, and most migrants were not eligible for migration or regularization under a prior visa program or immigration reform (such as the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA), most of those who migrated in the last three decades arrived without authorization and have had no pathway to subsequent legalization of their status. In addition to the perpetual threat of detention and deportation, undocumented immigrants are unable to freely travel.⁵ The defining characteristic of *paqueteros*, and that which sets them apart from their peers and neighbors, is their ability to travel. As such, compared to cities with longer-standing and more historically sedimented Mexican populations, the New York City Mexican migrant community has a greater reliance on *paqueteros* than many other, more established areas of Mexican settlement in the United States, because the ratio of those who can to those who cannot travel is more pronounced than in those places. In New York City, while citizenship rates in the Mexican population rose from 47% in 1990 to 57% in 2017, this includes US-born children who comprised 51% of the population in 2017. Only 6% of foreign-born Mexicans are naturalized, indicating still very low numbers of first-generation immigrants who have had access to naturalization. In contrast, in the US as a whole, 79% of the Mexican population are citizens, including 9% naturalized (Bergad 2019: 30–31). Many people face insurmountable barriers to regularization of their status under current laws (Dreby 2015; Smith 2006; De Genova and Peutz 2010).

Of the 43% of the Mexican population in New York City who are not citizens, it is unknown how many are undocumented, but my longitudinal ethnographic research indicates that most people lack mobility due first to lack of legal documentation for travel, and second to financial means. This creates a large market for *paqueteros* who bridge the gap between places of origin and places of settlement. *Paqueteros* have greater mobility, typically, than their clients. The *paqueteros* I know are naturalized US citizens, permanent residents, or are Mexican nationals with visas enabling multiple entries. Samuel, with whom I began this article, enjoyed an artisan's visa for ten years. This enabled him to travel to practice his craft (onyx stone working), as well as to transport onyx handicrafts. As an owner of an onyx workshop, employer of several people, as well as a known purveyor of onyx goods throughout Mexico, he did not have a hard time securing his visa in 2008 (given that demonstrating financial assets indicative of a low

likelihood of migration has long been an assumed prerequisite to securing a non-immigrant visa). However, when he went to renew it in 2018, at the end of its decade-long duration, he was denied a new visa. It is unclear to him whether an overall chilling in the US government approach to Mexico and Mexicans under the Trump administration or something more specific to his own application led to its denial. As of this writing, his daughter and wife, who hold valid visas enabling multiple entries, are handling the transnational parts of their business. When asked after the election of Trump and prior to the denial of his visa whether he anticipated changes in policy overall, he remarked, “Even though until now, I haven’t felt any new restrictions, in general, the people I know are fearful and we feel like what we do is a higher risk than before. We expect Donald Trump to restrict us more. And that limits our ability to follow our traditions.”

Paquetería’s Business Model

About once a month, Samuel hung a sign on his front gate advertising his next departure to the United States. Over the following week, he would collect packages from his clients. Some clients dropped by, knocked on his gate, and talked to Elena, who would receive and weigh the package. Other times, he would swing by in his vehicle to pick up packages. Like other *paqueteros*, Samuel took great care to ensure that he knew what he was carrying and how it was packaged—to protect the packages, but also to be able to navigate customs upon entry to the United States, where he knew he would have to list the items he was carrying and vouch for their compliance with US customs regulations.

Paqueteros typically serve clientele in their home communities. This is because *paquetería* is a business based on trust. The client must trust the *paquetero* to safely deliver their grandmother’s *mole* or fresh bread, while the *paquetero* must trust the client to be transparent and truthful about what is being transported. The *paqueteros* themselves are versant in current FDA, USDA, and other regulations about what can and cannot be transported: they know the rules and exceptions for agricultural products, prepared foods, dried fruits and vegetables, conserved meats, jams and sauces, as well as cheese and breads, and tell clients whether the package they are planning is permissible. *Paqueteros* need to ensure they are following all regulations in only transporting permitted items, to preserve their ability to travel and to avoid fines. Moreover, prohibited items are typically confiscated and confiscation of a client’s goods is a good way to

lose a client. But *paqueteros* depend on clients being forthright about what is in their packages, too. Thus, *mole*, a prepared, cooked sauce, is permitted, while dried fruits alone (even though they might be an ingredient in *mole*) or cooked meats (that might be served with *mole*) usually are not, so a jar or plastic container of *mole* is a typical *paquete*, while a package of *mole con pollo*, which contains cooked chicken, could cause a *paquetero* to be fined, or worse, detained and charged with a crime, or lose their visa. On one recent trip, Samuel recounted having a client’s *sabila* confiscated at the border: aloe vera is a fresh plant, and thus prohibited, but he thought it might be okay, as it is used as a medicinal salve.

Because of the mutual trust inherent in the contract between *paqueteros* and clients, most aspects of *paquetería* as a business are based on face-to-face interactions. Many *paqueteros* advertise in a micro-local fashion, on Facebook or WhatsApp, or as Samuel did, posting a sign on his front gate announcing his next departure. Samuel’s mobility and livelihood rested precisely on not violating the terms of his visa, or any laws of the United States and Mexico. Thus, he preferred to only transport the packages of people he knew. In rural Mexican contexts in which most families have members living in the United States, serving people he personally knew and their broader network of siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins provided Samuel enough of a customer base to ensure his business’s viability while also providing reassurance that his clients were people known to him and trustworthy. As I discuss later, this is changing in ways that threaten the viability of *paquetería* as a whole.

The other main reason why *paqueteros* cater primarily to people they know has to do with geography and is part of what sets them apart from professional courier services, such as Federal Express, UPS, and DHL. Many migrants from Mexico to the New York City area hail from communities in the Mixteca region, a semi-arid, rural area overlapping the states of Puebla, Oaxaca, and Guerrero. Tulcingo, for example, a municipality from which many Mexican migrants to Brooklyn originate, is located three hours by the current highway from the capital city of Puebla. By the time one nears Tulcingo on the highway from Puebla, the road has narrowed and is curvy, mountainous, treacherous, and difficult for multi-axle vehicles to reach. Tulcingo itself is ringed by dozens of smaller hamlets from which migrants hail, often not accessible by paved roads at all, and as many as three additional hours’ journey. Corporate courier services do not serve many such rural communities even though Tulcingo is larger than its neighboring municipalities and has a heavily transnational population. Even a smaller-scale, locally based courier service, like Tulcingo

Express, may not serve the smaller outlying communities. And the costs both for customers and for the business itself could be prohibitive. *Paqueteros*, on the other hand, reside in or are able to frequently circulate through geographically remote rural municipalities underserved by corporate couriers. They are able to micro-adjust their business model, buying a ticket for the United States only when they have secured enough packages to make it worth their while, and they charge affordable prices.

Samuel sometimes traveled by land, especially if he had a vehicle he was delivering, or if he had to deliver to customers in multiple locations. Other times, he would travel by plane. Many *paqueteros* travel only by plane. A typical *paquetero* will carry three 70-pound suitcases each time they travel, and will charge customers about \$5/pound for packages, grossing about \$1,000 each flight, which could amount to rather minimal profits when airfare can be \$400–600 round trip, and ground transportation getting to the Mexico City airport (as much as eight hours by car from rural Puebla hamlets) can be costly. *Paqueteros* may also have to pay excess baggage fees, unless they make such frequent trips that these are waived as part of frequent-flyer programs on the major airlines. *Paqueteros* often also employ and pay others—frequently family members and close friends—to aid in collecting and distributing packages and assist with packing and loading.

While the way that *paqueteros* transport goods falls outside of formal provisions for importing and exporting goods, and the scale of what they are doing does not incentivize them to undergo the lengthy and complicated task of acquiring import/export licenses, they are not operating outside the gaze of the law. On the contrary, they are probably more closely scrutinized than the average large-scale import/export business. While an average of only 3.7 percent of shipping containers are inspected at US ports (Kulisch 2016), all *paqueteros* entering the United States through airports or land borders are inspected. At John F. Kennedy airport, for example, where Samuel and many of his compatriots enter the United States, every item of baggage is x-rayed at least once on the way to the US and *paqueteros* must have granular and up-to-date awareness of regulations governing food and consumer goods in both countries. Their livelihood, always reliant on a thin profit margin and high degree of personal risk, depends on safely getting goods to recipients without prohibitively expensive taxes, customs duties or, worse, confiscation. Loss of goods would result in loss of revenue but also, more importantly, a reputational loss that can be fatal to a business model premised on trust.

Food System

Paqueteros play an important role in the changing global food system. As a result of NAFTA, Mexico has shifted its food system away from a state-coordinated structure for organizing production, distribution, and pricing that characterized much of the twentieth century, to a system governed by market forces, in which transnational corporations are favored in expanding their operations and the reach of their products across borders. What this has meant is that while a small-scale farmer might in the past have produced primarily for his or her own consumption, and sold a bit at market, aided by accessible distribution systems that controlled prices and facilitated transport of agricultural products, those supports were dismantled in preparation for NAFTA. Instead, larger-scale and industrial farming are favored, with an array of incentives that make it cheaper to expand across geographic locales (Gálvez 2018). This has transformed Mexico's food system, vastly increasing dependence on foreign food imports, as much as 41 percent (Carlsen 2011), as well as enabling processed food and beverage corporations and their retail counterparts to expand across the republic, with Walmart and its subsidiaries the top retailer in Mexico. Economic crisis propelled a massive wave of migration in the mid-1990s, further hampering small-scale farming due to lack of laborers and favorable return on investment. "Supermarketization" (Reardon and Berdegúe 2002) means that people in all parts of the country consume more mass-produced goods, increasing homogeneity in diets and production regimes. Without distribution systems, many small-scale farmers began to feed their corn to livestock, or stopped growing it altogether, rather than try to sell it at a loss.

So, while Mexicans in all but the smallest rural hamlets have access to much the same array of highly processed industrialized food products as people do in the United States and elsewhere—sodas, chips, cookies, muffins, crackers, yogurts, cereals, instant noodles, and so on—traditional foods are harder to come by. Thus, the highly regional, seasonal, labor-intensive, and culturally specific foods associated with what has been called the "milpa-based diet," whether heirloom corn, pumpkin seeds, hibiscus flowers, dried chiles, cactus paddles, and cactus fruit, to name a few, are harder to obtain. This is because these foods are not incorporated into the NAFTA food system. There is no corporate food distribution for hibiscus flowers or mineral salt. To the extent that producers are able to continue producing these foods, they do so for micro-local markets and consumption by their own family members. Even while Gruma, the largest industrial corn flour and tortilla corporation in Mexico and the

United States, might be ubiquitously available, it does not source the landrace corn grown by small-scale growers. Thus, mass-produced tortillas on both sides of the border are more likely to be manufactured from genetically modified, factory-farmed corn grown in the midwestern United States. Goya Foods, the largest producer and distributor of “Hispanic” foods, might distribute “culturally relevant” foods like black beans, garbanzos, lentils, and seasoning packets even in small towns and corner stores in the United States, but they also do not utilize the products of small-scale growers or niche products as specific as regionally particular chiles or herbs; rather, they are leaders in the massification of a generic collection of “Hispanic foods” sourced from a large global network of industrial farms.

A Mexican migrant living in New York City who wishes to have a taste of home might try their hand at local agriculture (Gálvez 2018), growing *quelites*, *pepiche*, cilantro, tomatillos, etc. even if it's on a fire escape or windowsill; patronize the farm stand or small grocery store of another Mexican immigrant family who does so; and/or call upon a *paquetero* to bring the foods from their home community. Thus, *paqueteros* operate in the gaps and omissions of the increasingly global and industrial transnational food system, satisfying a demand for very particular food products that is not met by the market.

One example, Natalia Méndez, Oaxacan chef and owner of La Morada, a critically acclaimed restaurant in the Bronx (Niarchos 2017), sources pumpkin seeds, *pepitas*, for her green *mole*, *mole verde* or *pepián*, from a *paquetero* who brings them from Oaxaca. Raw pumpkin seeds are widely available in the New York City area, but the ones that are available are not suitable for Méndez's *pepián*, she says, because the *pepitas* from Oaxaca are larger, and have more flesh and more oil. While US *pepitas* might produce a mealy, dry *pepián* requiring the addition of other fats, Oaxacan *pepitas*, when ground, create a luscious, rich paste on their own, to which she adds garlic, onions, jalapeños, and cilantro. She is so attached to Oaxacan *pepitas* that if the *paquetero* who brings her *pepitas*, or *pepita molida* (ground pumpkin seeds), is not on schedule, she removes *pepián* from her restaurant's menu temporarily, rather than substitute an inferior product.

Similarly, when Samuel's sister María Pacheco gave birth in the Bronx, their mother sent a variety of herbs associated with the postpartum period to her via a *paquetero* (this was before Samuel started his business). María suffered various postpartum difficulties, and her mother talked her husband, Raúl, through the preparation and application of herbal steam baths for initial postpartum recovery, as well as the

preparation of various herbs as teas to support lactation and ongoing uterine recovery (Gálvez 2011). While María's mother could not secure a visa to nurse her daughter herself, and Raúl would not have customarily been the postpartum caregiver to his wife—a role reserved for female specialists and relatives—the ability to secure the ingredients for these home remedies via a *paquetero* bridged the gap created by distance and immigration status between members of this family, enabling María to be cared for from afar by her mother, albeit in an improvised and modified fashion from traditional postpartum rituals. Even if it were possible for María's husband to secure the herbs locally, the fact that her mother lovingly packaged them and dispatched them on the next shipment of her local *paquetero* added a degree of love and connection to the herbs' use in her postpartum recovery, reinforcing the bond of care between mother, grandmother, and the new granddaughter.

Although NAFTA and now the USMCA have linked the United States, Mexico, and Canada economically, allowing big corporations to operate as if there were no border, the trade deal has, paradoxically, hindered the mobility of people, as well as goods produced by small-scale farmers and food purveyors. Fostering the mobility of capital and goods, NAFTA/USMCA has no provision for the free circulation of people, even while the economic model it fostered displaced so many from the countryside. Lacking options for safe and legal migration, many who were forced from their homes and into international migratory flows did so without authorization, heightening their vulnerability and their immobility once they reached their destinations. Unable to travel seasonally for work and to reunite with family, as generations of migrants did in the past before militarization of the border and criminalization of migratory flows, many Mexican nationals found themselves trapped in the United States. And the places they found themselves in are often food landscapes impoverished by structural inequalities, in which the food that is most ubiquitously available is not conducive to health (Brones 2018; Viladrich 2017; Penniman 2018; Reese 2019). Hana Garth's research makes clear the importance not only of affordability and accessibility of food but also its “adequacy.” A more complex concept than “sufficiency,” adequacy encompasses not only quantity of food, but how well it matches individual and cultural conceptualizations of what is necessary and satisfactory (Garth 2020). *Paqueteros* serve to link these migrant communities to their communities of origin, bridging the distance, and knitting together families separated by the border, one Tupperware container of grandmother's *mole* at a time.



FIGURE 2: Paquetero demonstrates one popular item, pepita molida, ground pumpkin seeds.

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“What Is in This Ziploc Bag?”

US government surveillance cameras point at the waiting rooms, x-ray machines, and conveyor belts that are part of secondary inspection at JFK airport by US Customs and Border Protection. The setup is probably similar at other points of entry. *Paqueteros* are almost always sent to secondary inspection, where instead of being waved through customs, they must put all carry-on and checked luggage through x-ray machines. I was asked to review surveillance video filmed at JFK airport in July 2018 as part of trial preparation as an expert witness in a federal case involving a *paquetera* that was eventually dismissed. The attorneys in the case authorized my recounting of my observations in this publication. In the video, I noted the seats in the waiting room were occupied by a few dozen people. Many of them sat leaning with exhaustion, their foot or hand resting protectively on a luggage cart piled high with suitcases. They waited to be called, but their posture indicated the mundanity of this procedure: they looked bored. When the time came, they hopped up, one at a time, and moved toward the conveyor belts and x-ray machines. Without assistance from officers, they heaved their luggage onto the belt. This was probably one of the most labor-intensive parts of their journey. *Paqueteros* and *paqueteras* helped each other to get their luggage onto the belts.

“What is in this bag?”, *paqueteros* are asked over and over again as inspectors held up plastic zipper bags with various food and medicinal items. *Pepita molida*; wood ash; ground blue, yellow, red or black corn; ground cacao; different kinds of salt; a vast variety of herbs, dried flowers, and roots. For

customs and border patrol agents who screen the entry of planeloads of *paqueteros* from Mexico City every day, the vast variety of foodstuffs, powders in different colors, dried leaves, and so on, might be baffling at best, or suspicious at worst. Even though *paqueteros* must be versant and strictly compliant with regulations governing the import of goods, food, and agricultural products in order to function and maintain their mobility and customer base, customs agents do not seem to be required to have any cultural competence. Confrontations and misunderstandings between *paqueteros* and government officials at ports of entry are frequent. Sometimes the lack of familiarity with the foodways of rural Mexican communities can make officials suspicious about things that are mundane and routine, such as wood ash (a fine gray powder) or mineral salt (a coarse white powder), both items that may be used for soaking and softening dried corn before grinding in a process called nixtamalization. Because gray or white powders might visually resemble various kinds of illicit drugs, *paqueteros* are obliged to confront suspicions that what they are importing is not legitimate or legal.

Coupled with larger xenophobic and racializing discourses associating Mexicans with crime (Chavez 2013; Moreno 2018; Martínez-Brawley and Zorita 2018; Muñoz Martínez 2018), *paqueteros* may be profiled for their race, their nationality, and also for their role as transporters of goods, and thus wrongfully associated with organized crime and drug smuggling. Class bias may also play a role, because *paqueteros* tend to push the limits on baggage weight and capacity, with the heavy, bulky, or awkwardly shaped bags and packages they maneuver onto the x-ray machine belts. Berg (2017) writes about the ways that Latin Americans traveling to the United States navigate hierarchies of race, class, and citizenship, and how migrants with darker skin are often questioned as to whether their mobility is legitimate. *Paqueteros* may travel more often than even the most frequently flying banker, but are often treated as though they lack knowledge or capacity to navigate international travel. I have witnessed this in my own journeys to and from Mexico City by plane, noting that *paqueteros*' evident familiarity with transnational flight and airport routines was not rewarded by airport personnel with respect or courtesy; rather, they were treated with hostility and their heavy suitcases were subject to derogatory commentary and complaint. Samuel and others have reported to me how their luggage is disdainfully scrutinized by gloved customs agents who scrunch their noses and rifle through items with evident disgust. Orders are barked at them, often in English, and at the slightest lag in response, are repeated even more loudly, even though *paqueteros* are well versed in what they have to routinely do to make their luggage

accessible to inspection. Such scrutiny is seen as part of the job for *paqueteros*, who describe customs inspections as a degrading but routine aspect of their business. Further, officers have disdain not only for the *paqueteros* but also for their goods. The items that are so prized and valued by clients are not appreciated by officers, heightening the social distance between US law enforcement officials and *paqueteros*. It also is ironic because *paqueteros*, like so many other small business owners, have much to lose from any stains on their reputation: their livelihood is dependent on both their mobility and their trustworthiness.

The ability of *paqueteros* to conduct their business may also be squeezed by forces on the Mexican side of the border. While I have witnessed Mexican border and airport officials treat *paqueteros* kindly, helping them lift packages and respectfully processing their entry to the country with a cheerful “*Bienvenido paisano*,”⁶ *paqueteros* also report being asked for inordinate customs duties and bribes while crossing borders by land or air. Further, organized crime may be targeting *paqueteros*, who are vulnerable small business operators, as mules. One woman told me that a new trend is for airport employees to take pictures of the luggage of frequent flyers, including *paqueteros*, then provide the photos to smugglers. The smugglers create identical replicas of a *paqueteros*’ suitcases, down to the tattered pink ribbon or Snoopy keychain that may have been tied onto the suitcase to distinguish it from other luggage on a baggage carousel, so that a legitimate suitcase can be swapped with one filled with contraband and transported unwittingly by a *paquetero*. Whether this is urban legend or true is perhaps irrelevant, as such reported practices may have a chilling effect on *paqueteros*’ business. Further, *paqueteros* are increasingly being extorted or duped into knowingly or unknowingly transporting contraband, with their legitimate transport of nostalgia items and gifts being used as cover for transport of illicit items. The *paqueteros* I know are reconsidering whether it is safe to continue their work in light of changing conditions that exploit their routes and their social networks.


Discussion

When *paqueteros* connect micro-local foodways and people who are geographically distant from them, they are rehumanizing a food system whose scale has expanded in ways that depersonalize and alienate many. Like so many regional and transnational migrants in previous periods, *paqueteros* help appease nostalgia and homesickness for certain foods and flavors “from home.” This need is particularly acute for the first

generation for whom approximations of familiar foods may serve primarily to heighten perceptions of distance and separation. The children and grandchildren of first-generation migrants may not have the same craving for grandma’s *mole* or bread. Also, over time, local purveyors begin to offer a greater variety and quantity of culturally specific food items not available to the initial waves of migrants to a place. While New York City, a destination for large numbers of Mexican migrants only in the last few decades, still has more first-generation migrants than US-born people of Mexican descent, the ratio of US to foreign born is declining (50.3% in 2017, as opposed to 64.3% foreign born in 1990) (Bergad 2019: 8). Some neighborhoods feature a selection of small and medium grocery stores that offer imported Mexican food items and locally grown produce that serve Mexican consumers, such as *nopales*, *papalo*, *pepiche*, *epazote*, tomatillos, chiles, and more. Yet there is still evidently a significant demand for products and prepared foods that are specific to the particular hamlets, municipalities, and households from which migrants have journeyed. Meeting this demand is the *paquetero*’s niche.

It is possible that the role of *paqueteros* will decline in coming years as conditions change; for example, as time spent in the United States lengthens, first-generation migrants and especially their children and grandchildren may experience less acute nostalgia and be less willing to invest time and energy in securing food from communities of origin. Even though first-generation migrants still largely lack access to regularization of their migration status and it is hard to anticipate whether widespread legalization might occur in the short term, their children and grandchildren may be more able to travel and carry goods back and forth. And the number and availability of Mexican food products available locally may become more matched to demand as small stores expand and Mexican immigrants and their children establish themselves as small business owners in the communities to which they have migrated. While owning a small business is often a goal of migrants, to achieve it requires social and monetary capital that may be more accessible with longer duration of settlement in the United States. Even in my own experiences as a home cook (I am a white, US-born woman of Western European ancestry, but grew up eating and cooking Mexican food in California), I have found that the availability of Mexican ingredients in New York City has expanded significantly in the thirty years I have lived here: while even tortillas were once hard to come by, now a number of local Mexican markets carry ingredients as specialized as fresh *epazote*, *quelites*, and *nopales*, not to mention fresh corn *masa*, dozens of varieties of chiles, cheese, and other ingredients for cooking from scratch. The quality and selection of prepared and semi-

prepared foods have also expanded, with *mole* paste, for example, available in many different varieties. Additionally, even while *paqueteros*' services may still be in high demand today, as we can see with the example of Samuel, and even before the coronavirus pandemic froze almost all international travel, it had become harder to obtain almost all types of visas for travel to the US from Mexico since Trump's presidency began, and, as we will see below, *paqueteros* are increasingly profiled by customs officials and targeted by organized crime. The rising risk and difficulty faced by *paqueteros* may diminish their ability to operate in the future.

Perhaps it is not surprising, given overall trends toward criminalization of migrants in the United States in the last several years, and the specifically anti-Mexican rhetoric of the Trump administration (Martínez-Cruz 2019; Martínez-Brawley and Zorita 2018; Moreno 2018), that *paqueteros* would frequently have to defend themselves from false accusations of criminality. The role of the *paquetero* or *paquetera* could instead be understood to be an expression of love and connection between people separated by distance. 

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NOTES

1. Translations from Spanish by the author.
2. The name of the town and my interlocutors are pseudonyms.
3. *Paquetero* (m)/*paquetera* (f) is a noun referring to a person engaged in *paquetería*, package delivery. A gender-neutral spelling might be *paqueterx*, but I do not use this as I have not seen it used by those who are *paqueteros*, who use the 'o' and 'os' (plural) endings in reference to singular male and/or gender-neutral plural *paqueteros*. While they are called by different names, *paquetería*-like services are common also between migrant communities of origin and destination in Africa and Asia, with the Philippines' *balikbayan* boxes providing an especially well-documented example. For the Philippines, see Fresnoza-Flot and Pécoud 2007; Burgess and Haksar 2005; Camposano 2012; for Jamaica, see Golash-Boza 2014.
4. The mapping project by Flores et al. (2020) refers to restaurants, not stores, but provides a rich indication of the spatial distribution of Mexican foods in New York City.
5. Space does not allow me enter into specifics about this inability to travel freely. It is largely a reality, even though some exceptions, such as "Advanced Parole," allow some undocumented immigrants, including holders of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

(DACA), to travel abroad for very specific reasons, usually humanitarian, professional, or educational. Since Trump took office, Advanced Parole has been largely inaccessible.

6. Welcome back, compatriot.

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