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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Weaving transnational spaces: Peruvian and Colombian suitcase traders moving across South American borders

Lorena Izaguirre * and Yvonne Riaño *

Institute of Geography and 'nccr – on the move', University of Neuchatel, Neuchatel, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Our study addresses suitcase trading that involves buying goods from one country and transporting them across borders in portable packages, so as to avoid government taxes. Although a globally common practice, and a significant source of income for many, we have scant understanding of suitcase trade practices in South America. Therefore, we examine how Peruvian and Colombian suitcase traders establish and sustain transnational spaces by engaging in repeated cross-border trade activities between (1) Peru and Brazil, entailing routes of 3,500 km, and (2) Colombia and Venezuela, involving routes of only 1 km. Further, to analyse the spatialities of transnational practices, a focus absent in many studies on transnationalism and transnational spaces, we propose a perspective that combines mobilities, connections, and meanings. Our study, which employs ethnographic, biographical, and participatory methods with 40 suitcase traders, reveals that transnational space is not just an abstract entity in which transnational social practices occur. Instead, it is structured by frequent or occasional mobilities along specific routes and means, by socioeconomic connections between geographically distant or proximate sites, and by the meanings that individuals give to their transnational practices. Our findings emphasize that the perspective of spatialities helps us understand the heterogeneity of transnational spaces.

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Transnational space; Mobilities; Spatiality; Suitcase traders; Informality; Multi-sited methods; Literature review; South America

Introduction

Informal trade between two or more countries is a historically global practice and operates under different modalities. Such trade is 'a form of unrecorded (or under-recorded) international transactions in goods that is currently existent at the edges of formal trade' (International Monetary Fund 1998, 6). Informal cross-border trade today is global (Desai 2009) and constitutes an important part of the informal world economy.

One particular form of informal cross-border trade is suitcase trading, widespread in Africa (Desai 2009; Wrigley-Asante and Frimpong 2023), Asia (Hung and Ngo 2019), Latin America (Alfonso 2020) and the post-Soviet region (Turaeva 2010). Suitcase traders can be understood as a form of transnational entrepreneurship (Sandoz et al. 2021). A substantial source of income for both men and women, it is micro-scale, as traders carry goods and/or work items on their backs, in a suitcase, or a cart and circulate between countries on foot and/or using public transport

CONTACT Lorena Izaguirre lorena.izaguirre@uclouvain.be Institute for the Analysis of Change in Contemporary and Historical Societies (IACS), University UCLouvain, Place Montesquieu1/L2.08.01, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
*Both authors contributed equally to the conception and realisation of this article.

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(Piart 2013) to avoid paying government taxes (Aydin, Oztig, and Bulut 2016). Informal traders are skilled at executing business deals and circulating across international borders (Piart 2013). Border areas represent lucrative zones of exchange and trade (Gauthier 2012, 138), and suitcase traders benefit from differential pricing and availability of goods and services on either side (Nakanjako, Onyango, and Kabumbuli 2021), experiencing 'the best of both worlds' (Missaoui 1995). Although most work on a small scale, some large-scale contraband traders smuggle goods in north-western Uganda and are locally known as 'tycoons' (Titeca 2012). Besides 'suitcase trading' (Hung and Ngo 2019; Lacaze 2010; Turaeva 2010), scholars have also used the terms 'shuttle trading' (Cieślewska 2013; Piart 2013), 'illegal entrepreneurship' (Fadahunsi and Rosa 2002), 'mobile entrepreneurship' (Peberdy 2000a), and '*maleteros*' (Riaño 2022) to describe transnational suitcase trade.

We observe a growing academic interest in suitcase trading, and until now, most studies have been conducted in Africa (Braun and Haugen 2023; Darkwah 2002; Fadahunsi and Rosa 2002; Little 2010; Muzvidziwa 1998; Peberdy 2000a; 2000b; Titeca 2012; Wrigley-Asante 2013a; 2013b; Wrigley-Asante and Frimpong 2023). Studies in Asia were conducted mainly in the decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, when opportunities for international mobility increased (Cieślewska 2013; Hung and Ngo 2019; Lacaze 2010; Piart 2013; Rippa 2019; Turaeva 2010). Informal North African traders in Mediterranean cities have also received attention, particularly from French researchers (Peraldi 2005; Schmoll and Semi 2013; Schmoll, Péraldi, and Manry 2005; Tarrius 2002). However, little work has been done on Latin America, where studies have mostly focused on informal trade between Mexico and the United States (Gauthier 2012; Pisani and Richardson 2012, Jimenez 2021), with exceptions being the case studies on South America published by this article's authors (Izaguirre 2019; Riaño 2022). Moreover, studies are often available only in Spanish or Portuguese.

Existing studies have greatly advanced our knowledge of informal cross-border trade, but two key areas need further research. First, as explained above, there are few studies on suitcase trading in South America. Second, topics addressing the spatiality of informal trade (i.e. studying the places through which cross-border trade occurs, the circulation routes of traders, and the transnational spaces formed by repeated international exchanges and connections) have received little attention. As our empirical material shows, suitcase traders constantly move across space, movements that connect distant places and produce symbolic meanings that are essential in shaping and sustaining transnational spaces (Sinatti 2008; Tapia Ladino 2015). Thus, to advance our understanding of the *spatialities* of suitcase trade practices, we address the following questions: What is the geography of the circulatory *mobilities* in the trade? What kinds of *connections* do suitcase traders create between geographically proximate and distant spaces while moving across borders? What kinds of *meanings* are attached to the circulatory practices of suitcase traders while moving in physical space?

We contribute to the literature in three ways. First, by focusing on South America, we address scantily studied South-South cross-border mobilities. Second, we add to the literature on transnational spaces by adopting and operationalising a *spatialities* framework comprising three analytical dimensions: (*a) mobilities, (b) connections,* and *(c) meanings*. By doing so, we advance our theoretical understandings of the value of spatial mobility as a means of social mobility (see Riaño, Mittmasser, and Sandoz 2022), and of 'globalisation from below' (Mathews and Vega 2012; Riaño et al. 2024). Third, the paper addresses two case studies: (a) suitcase traders moving between the localities of Cusco (Peru) and São Paulo (Brazil) and across the Peru-Bolivia and Bolivia-Brazil borders, and (b) suitcase traders moving between Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio de Táchira (Venezuela). Using ethnographic, biographical, and participatory research methods, we study 40 suitcase traders. By considering two different case studies, we not only strengthen our findings but also produce a useful contrasting analysis of suitcase trading in two different geographical contexts and capture the heterogeneity of practices among suitcase traders.

The article is structured in five parts. The first reviews the literature on informal cross-border trade, and the second part proposes an analytical framework to study this social practice from a *spatialities* perspective – an underutilised approach thus far –that combines *mobilities, connections,*

and meanings. The third outlines the methods and study contexts, and the fourth presents the results of our empirical analysis on mobilities, connections, and meanings in both case studies, as well as discusses their differences and similarities. Lastly, the conclusion places the results in a wider context.

1. Informal cross-border trade: literature review

We begin with a systematic review (heretofore lacking) of the literature on informal cross-border trade. We examine English-language and French-language publications in international journals as well as Spanish and Portuguese-language publications in Latin America. These studies have advanced our knowledge of informal cross-border trade in five main areas:

(a) *The socioeconomic and urban impact of informal cross-border trade*. Although this form of trade is not captured by government data (Little 2010), and despite governmental attempts to eradicate it, studies indicate that it is increasing (Fadahunsi and Rosa 2002). Such trade plays a vital role in African societies (Lesser and Moisé-Leeman 2009; Muzvidziwa 1998); for example, cross-border livestock trade in Ethiopia and Somalia ensures food security because trade revenues finance grain imports (Little 2010). In the Great Lakes region, the informal trade of goods between the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi enables regions that do not produce enough food to meet their needs. Moreover, small trade provides much-needed employment for at least 45,000 traders and their families in a region long suffering from unemployment and armed conflict (Titeca and Kimanuka 2012). Researchers suggest that 'for certain products and countries [in Africa], the value of informal trade may meet or even exceed the value of formal trade' (Bouët, Pace, and Glauber 2018, v). In Asia, meanwhile, Piart (2013, 333) shows that 'goods brought to Uzbekistan [from Istanbul in Turkey] by shuttle traders accounted for between 20 and 48 per cent of gross imports in the early 2000s'. In the Americas, so-called 'ant' traders smuggle used clothes from the United States into Mexico, increasing the economic integration of the border region (Gauthier 2012; 2007). Furthermore, the commercial networks of Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians who import goods from France and Italy to their own countries, and vice versa, have reshaped cities such as Marseille, Naples, Turin, and Istanbul (Peraldi 2005; Schmoll and Semi 2013; Schmoll, Péraldi, and Manry 2005; Tarrius 2002). Similarly, Peruvian suitcase entrepreneurs appropriate central urban spaces in São Paulo (Brazil), for trade, which is now home to large numbers of Peruvians (Izaguirre 2019).

(b) *The links between the formal and informal economy*. Informal cross-border trade is often seen as illegal. However, in countries such as Nigeria, illegality is the norm, since traders must bribe officials to trade *any* goods, whether legal or illegal (Fadahunsi and Rosa 2002). Furthermore, the term 'informal' may be misleading as it obscures the multiple linkages between the formal and informal sectors (Peberdy 2000a). For example, in Southern China, although each individual transaction is small-scale and based on informal networks, the larger operational chain is run by highly organised syndicates (Hung and Ngo 2019).

(c) *The role of transnational networks*. Cross-border networks of traders, financers, and transporters play a key role in linking numerous actors across vast spaces. Many are bound by kinship ties, religion, and/or ethnicity (Little 2010). Furthermore, trust and social relations are key to minimising risks along the circulatory routes. Pakistani traders buying goods in China and transporting them by bus use online technologies to cultivate their social networks on both sides of the border (Rippa 2019). The case of traders smuggling used cars between Chile and Bolivia illustrates the global dimension of an informal trade network involving the Japanese, Turks, Pakistanis, Chileans, and Bolivians. When circulating through informal routes, they pay Bolivian communities a 'right of way' fee, and when they (rarely) pass through state tolls, make a 'voluntary contribution' to the police (Jimenez 2021).

(d) *The rise of women traders*. The number of women crossing borders to conduct informal trade has risen in past decades (Blumberg, Malaba, and Meyers 2016; Darkwah 2002). Such trade is an opportunity for African women to improve their social position, support their families, and empower themselves (Wrigley-Asante and Frimpong 2023). In Zimbabwe, informally importing goods from South Africa is essential for women to survive in a continuing economic crisis associated with the widespread shuttering of industries that began in the late 1990s (Manjokoto and Ranga 2017). Women can escape poverty and gain a degree of self-fulfilment through informal cross-border trade despite the challenges and risks (Wrigley-Asante 2013b). They make up 74 percent of traders across four border locations in the African Great Lakes region (Titeca and Kimanuka 2012), and shuttle traders from the post-Soviet transition are typically female, composing 85 percent of Uzbeks traders travelling to Turkey (Piart 2013).

(e) *The challenges faced by informal traders*. Certain conditions present barriers to cross-border trade in Africa due to a lack of markets for goods, restrictive government policies, and insufficient infrastructure and credit (Little 2010). In Zimbabwe, for example, local authorities harass traders by confiscating undeclared goods (Manjokoto and Ranga 2017). Although men and women both face multiple challenges, women must also juggle family responsibilities (Darkwah 2002) and can be more vulnerable. Women trading goods from China to Kyrgyzstan live under constant threat of robbery and extortion by mafia groups (Cieślewska 2013). However, they have proved resilient and savvy. When the border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic damaged the livelihoods of Ghanaian traders, women devised coping strategies including switching suppliers and circulating along illegal routes (Wrigley-Asante and Frimpong 2023).

In conclusion, despite key advances, the *spatialities* of informal cross-border trade remain understudied. Until now, scholars have essentially used the term 'transnational spaces' metaphorically (Braun and Haugen 2023), without proposing a conceptual or empirical approach. Lacaze's (2010) ethnographic study of Mongolian suitcase traders addresses some spatial aspects of the trade, such as the transnational mobility techniques of Mongolian porters, the spatial organisation of the places where they trade and the ethnic networks underpinning the creation of new 'circulatory routes'. However, Lacaze and other scholars in the field do not conduct a comprehensive spatial analysis of how geographical mobilities (across smaller or larger distances), frequent cross-border contacts, and the associated meanings that arise, influence the emergence of specific types of transnational spaces. To address this research gap, we need to further study the geographies of traders' transnational *mobilities*, the *connections* they create between trading spaces, and the *meanings* they attach to their spatial practices.

2. Studying suitcase trading from the perspective of transnational spaces

This section attempts to close the *spatialities* gap in the literature by proposing a practicable framework for studying informal cross-border trade from the perspective of transnational space. We first review the academic literature on transnational spaces, establishing its strengths and weaknesses, and then propose an analytical framework for our empirical analysis of Colombian and Peruvian suitcase trading practices.

The concept of 'transnational space' has been used by both migration scholars and geographers. For migration scholars, it describes the cross-border activities that blur the dichotomous vision of 'host society concerns versus homeland concerns' (Faist 2013, 4). Transnational spaces can be 'relatively dense and durable configurations of social practices, systems of symbols and artefacts' (Pries 2001, 5) created by cross-border mobility and the exchange of people, money, and other resources. Faist (2017, 1) defines these spaces as 'combinations of social and symbolic ties and their contents, positions in networks and organisations, and networks of organisations that cut across the borders of at least two national states'. When studying transnational spaces, migration scholars emphasise

social practices, as well as political and symbolic dynamics, and see such spaces as opportunities for social mobility (Stock and Fröhlich 2021). Thus, transnational spaces are viewed as abstract fields in which transnational social practices plays out. Two main concepts, 'transnational space' and 'transnational social field' (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992), are used, yet the terms are often used interchangeably. Scholars have thus called for a proper operationalisation of both concepts applied to specific case studies (Levitt and Schiller 2004, 1009).

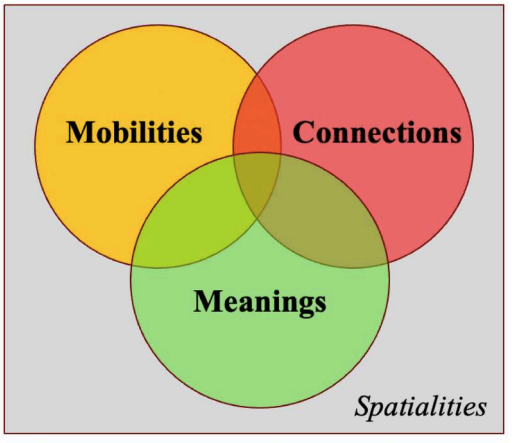
For geographers, transnational economic networks, political movements, and cultural forms reflect and reproduce current spatial transformations (Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer 2004). They emphasise that 'increasing numbers of people participate in transnational spaces, irrespective of their own migrant histories or "ethnic" identities' (Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer 2004, 2), and thus can be occupied by a wide range of actors, not all of whom are migrants. Geographers stress moving beyond a metaphorical understanding of space to explicitly address the *spatialities* of transnational processes (Collyer and King 2015; Riaño 2017; Voigt-Graf 2004). By 'spatialities', they mean 'the diverse ongoing connections and networks that bind different parts of the world together and that are constituted through (and in fact constitute) particular sites and places' (Featherstone, Phillips, and Waters 2007, 383–384). Geographers also criticise the 'decoupling' of 'geographic' space from social structures in studies of transnational space, which 'denies the ongoing social-spatial relationship, particularly the mutually constituted nature of social relations and place' (Massey 1994 cited by Collyer and King 2015, 191). According to them, the significance of geographical space must not be underestimated (Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer 2004, 1; Riaño, Mittmasser, and Sandoz 2022). Some studies have assumed that geographical distance no longer matters because of contemporary digital technologies and lower flying costs that connect people globally. However, it is forgotten that many migrants in the Global South can neither afford the new technologies nor fly (Riaño et al. 2023).

Geographers thus seek to situate the transnational practices of migrants within the specific localities and times that shape their agency and capture the processes by which such localities become interconnected (e.g. Brickell and Datta 2011). They argue for 'capturing the ways in which trans-migrants are embedded in place, unable to escape their local context despite being transnational' (Featherstone, Phillips, and Waters 2007, 385). Consequently, studies should consider the geographical boundedness of transnational practices, a focus absent in much of the literature on transnationalism and transnational spaces (Collyer and King 2015; Sheringham 2010). Lastly, scholars also plead for moving beyond static understandings of transnationalism and homing in on the cross-border *mobilities* of people, goods, capital, and ideas that sustain emerging transnational spaces (Sheller and Urry 2016).

We now reflect on how to best empirically study transnational spaces from a *spatialities* perspective. Building on previous work on space as a social construction (Lefebvre 2005; Riaño 2017), and as illustrated in Figure 1 below, we focus on three analytically distinct yet intertwined dimensions: *(a) mobilities, (b) connections, and (c) meanings*. We investigate the where of mobilities, connections, and meanings; the materialities involved (e.g. size, location, distance, accessibility, topography, communication means and transport infrastructure); and the localities connected (Riaño 2017).

(a) *Mobilities*. We examine the cross-border mobilities of suitcase traders by paying attention to who is moving, what goods are moved, the means of transport, the crossing routes, the places of origin, crossing and destination, the distances travelled, mobility routines, and the contextual conditions under which suitcase traders operate. These factors are embedded in border control and mobility regimes, understood as the regulatory settings that facilitate the mobility of some social groups while hindering the mobility of others (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Such regimes play an essential role in traders' ability to circulate from one country to another (Pries 2019; Sandoz et al. 2021, 2022).
(b) *Connections*. Here, we study the geography of the social connections on which suitcase traders rely and how cross-border exchanges create and sustain socio-spatial connections between

Mobilities: geographies of mobility, routes crossed, trading places, distances travelled, physical infrastructure for mobility, mobility regimes



Connections: geographies of social networks, places connected by socio-economic exchanges

Meanings: places of significance for livelihoods & life aspirations

Figure 1. Dimensions of study to examine the *spatialities* of cross-border trading practices. Source: own representation.

specific localities. Social networks are 'social alliances structuring everyday action' (Riaño 2000, 73) that connect individuals in a complex system of interpersonal relationships and social roles (Dahinden 2005) and support suitcase-trading activities. They are the basic social structures around which mobility practices are organised (Faist 1998; Pries 2001). Furthermore, we acknowledge that these connections are embedded in power structures.

(c) *Meanings.* As Tarrius (1992) argues, social meaning is produced as people circulate in physical space. Thus, we examine the significance of cross-border exchanges for the livelihoods of suitcase traders as well as their personal aspirations, such as their desire for travel or personal security, often linked to their geographical imaginations of 'other' places, and the opportunities that they associate with those places. Such imaginaries play a key role in mobility and migration decisions (Riaño 2015a, 45). By livelihoods, we refer to their struggle for survival, safety, and economic growth (Thieme 2008). Although migration (and mobility) are usually conceived of as 'an instrumental undertaking' (Carling and Schewel 2017, 10), mobilities can also be valued more abstractly as a means of enhancing one's sense of belonging and satisfying an eagerness for adventure. Moreover, as our case studies demonstrate, social meanings are contextual, dependent on a given place (Riaño 2017) and an individual's social position.

3. Methods and context

This paper contrasts two separate studies on suitcase trading in South America.

The first, conducted by Lorena Izaguirre, belongs to a larger project on the mobility practices and modes of incorporation of Peruvian migrants in São Paulo. Here, she focuses on suitcase traders moving between two distant locations, Cusco (Peru) and São Paulo (Brazil). The second study, by Yvonne Riaño, also belongs to a larger study on transnational entrepreneurs with migration experience (https://nccr-onthemove.ch/projects/migrant-entrepreneurship-mapping-cross-border-mobilities-and-exploring-the-role-of-spatial-mobility-capital/). Her focus is on suitcase traders circulating between two nearby localities, Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio del Táchira (Venezuela).

After reviewing our original data, we were intrigued by how geographical distance shapes suitcase traders' mobility practices, as in the first case, Cusco and São Paulo are separated by 3,500 km, whereas in the second, Cúcuta's periphery and San Antonio del Táchira are only 1 km apart. Furthermore, both studies address different historical contexts and mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Brazilian migration law was until 2017 quite strict, making it almost impossible for migrants to settle, which reinforced circulatory patterns for Peruvian traders, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. By contrast, Venezuela had a lax migration regime vis-à-vis Colombian immigrants until 2015, when it arbitrarily expelled 25,000 Colombians. Also, the international border between Colombia and Venezuela was closed between 2015 and 2022, although people still crossed along illegal paths to transport goods between the countries.

Both studies used a qualitative research approach. Research participants were selected following the principle of maximum variation sampling (Glaser 1992), which does not seek statistical representativity but rather an in-depth understanding of how key factors such as gender, age, residential location, and migration rights shape suitcase trading. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the studied sample.

Lorena Izaguirre and Yvonne Riaño drew on multi-sited ethnographic observations (Marcus 1995): between 2014 and 2016 in São Paulo (Brazil) and Cusco (Peru) for the first study; and between 2019 and 2022 in *La Parada* (metropolitan area of Cúcuta, Colombia), la *trocha* (the illegal passage between Colombia and Venezuela), and San Antonio de Táchira (Venezuela) for the second. Furthermore, they carried out numerous informal conversations and life-narrative interviews (Denzin 1989), which aimed to uncover the milestones of a person's mobility trajectories and experiences. In Colombia, Yvonne Riaño conducted participatory *Minga* workshops with suitcase traders, which aimed at creating spaces for mutual learning among academics and non-academics (Riaño 2015b). Riaño also used mental maps (Jung 2014), a method that graphically captures the subjective perceptions of Colombian traders' desires for the future. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcribed material was analysed using the qualitative content analysis method, which classifies interview texts through deductive and inductive coding procedures.

In the Peru-Brazil case, the data originally collected by Lorena Izaguirre concerned the mobility practices of Andean Peruvians circulating between Cusco and São Paulo from 1980 to 1998. They were in their early twenties when they engaged in cross-border trade activities, and later became established shop owners and traders in São Paulo (especially along the commercial avenue 25 de Março and in surrounding areas) as well as in Cusco. She accessed research participants through direct store contact and also through personal contacts and snowballing. The data collected by Yvonne Riaño concerns Colombian suitcase traders living transnational lives between Colombia and Venezuela as they cross the border between both countries daily to work, trade, and socialise.

Table 1. The main characteristics of the studied suitcase traders.

	Suitcase traders between Cusco (Peru) and São Paulo (Brazil)	Suitcase traders between Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio de Táchira (Venezuela)
Fieldwork sessions	August–October 2014; August 2015–January 2016	August 2019; June 2021; February 2022
Research participants	25 Peruvians (3 women, 22 men).	15 Colombians (12 women, 3 men).
Demographic characteristics	Smallholders, handicrafters, working-class origins Secondary education: 22 Tertiary training: 3 Age: 40–60 (at interview time)	Smallholders, working-class origins Primary education: 10 Secondary education: 5 Age: 25–50 (at interview time)
Goods and services moved across borders	Handicrafts, semi-precious stones	Food, medicines, alcohol, petrol, furniture, beauty products, shoes, clothing, handicrafts, beauty services.
Interview location	20 interviews in São Paulo (Brazil) 5 in Cusco (returnees) (Peru).	10 interviews in Cúcuta (Colombia) 5 in San Antonio (Venezuela).

She accessed her research participants through Deredez, an NGO working for the rights of the victims of the border, in La Parada (Cúcuta), and snowballing.

3.1. Suitcase trading between Peru and Brazil: context

Peruvian migration to Brazil gained visibility in recent decades due to the growing interest of researchers in cross-border dynamics between the Brazilian state of Amazonas and Peru and Colombia. Peruvian presence in the Amazon began to increase in the mid-1980s and the first half of the 1990s during the area's 'rubber boom', particularly in the border town of Tabatinga but also in cities of the Alto Solimões region and Manaus (the state's capital) (De Oliveira 2006). Peruvian migrants in this region were mostly low-skilled and low-educated individuals with rural smallholder and indigenous origins (2006, 188).

The cross-border dynamics in the Cusco-São Paulo case study involve three borders (see Figure 2). The trading circuit passes through the Peruvian cities of Pisaq, Cusco, and Juliaca; the Bolivian towns of Desaguadero, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Puerto Quijarro, and Puerto Suárez; and the Brazilian urban centres of Cáceres, Corumbá, and São Paulo (Izaguirre 2019). Cities along the Bolivian-Brazilian border such as Corumbá (Brazil), Puerto Quijarro, and Puerto Suárez are part of the main transit route for bilateral trade between Bolivia and Brazil (Dilla Alfonso 2020, 40). Da Silva (2013) has shown that 95 percent of the Brazil-Bolivia binational trade passes through the border zone of Corumbá-Puerto Suárez, and that most of the trade flows from Brazil's large cities such as São Paulo, Porto Alegre, and Belo Horizonte.

In the 1980s, Peruvian suitcase traders from the Cusco region took advantage of border differentials in the price of handicrafts, which was significantly higher in Brazil. According to Joselito Ríos,[1] a handicraft seller from Cusco, suitcase traders made a 'massive profit', two to three times higher than the purchase price of the products in Cusco, and 'the business was awesome'. Parity between the Brazilian currency and the U.S. dollar at that time increased these margins.[2] This trade circulation, which mostly evaded the tax regime, took place between the 1980s and mid-1990s and comprised two phases. The 1980s were marked by a pendular commercial mobility, or repeated spatial mobilities between the same places for trade (The term was first coined by Tarrius 1995) to describe the circular mobilities of Moroccan cross-border entrepreneurs.

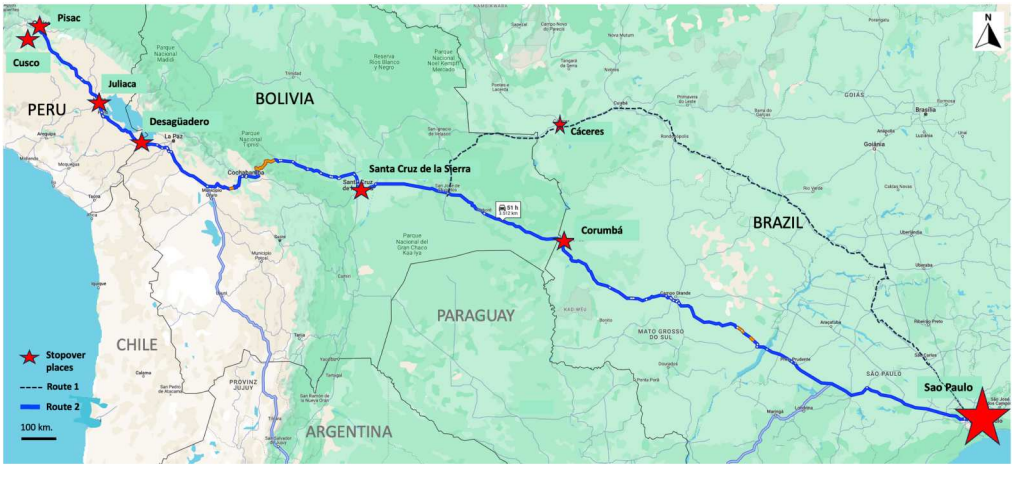


Figure 2. Area of study: trade mobilities between Cusco (Peru) and São Paulo (Brazil). Source: Figure composition and legend placement: Yvonne Riaño. Map data: Google ©2024, www.google.com/maps/place/Corumb%C3%A1,+Mato+Grosso+do+Sul,+Brasilien/@-17.588986,-58.8300045,6z/data=!4m6!3m5!1s0x9387a076798e7565:0x5e7c4a2bdbaeab6!8m2!3d-19.0051788!4d-57.6527913!16zL20vMDRyczdf?entry=ttu.

Cross-traders made several round trips to São Paulo each year, staying for up to one month, and then returned to Cusco to oversee the production of new handicrafts by family members or *paisanos*.[3] Thanks to these repeated mobilities, cross-border traders managed to carve out an economic niche in São Paulo's booming economy. In the mid-1990s, however, the circulation dynamics evolved to a more classical migration pattern as they settled in São Paulo.

Migration regimes also shaped these patterns. While circulation was necessary for cross-border traders, it was also made necessary by the restrictive nature of Brazil's migration policy until 2017. Later, two avenues for migratory regularisation emerged: traders could benefit from the country's 1998 migration amnesty policy or become regularised if their children were born in Brazil. This loosening created new business opportunities and the option of settling in São Paulo with handicraft importing businesses, thus ending the dynamics of circular migration.

3.2. Suitcase trading between Colombia and Venezuela: context

Neighbourhood relations, border permeability, and ease of communication have historically facilitated socioeconomic exchanges between the cross-border cities of Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio de Táchira (Venezuela) (see Figure 3). As a result, there are many opportunities for suitcase traders; their trade mobilities are short-distance (1 km), binational (Colombia – Venezuela), and often commissioned by traders with greater capital or by families and individuals.

Geopolitical conflicts have historically shaped the spatial mobilities of the Colombian suitcase traders. Many originate from rural Norte Santander, an area in northeastern Colombia bordering Venezuela, and of which Cúcuta is the capital. This region, the epicentre of Colombia's cocaine cultivation, has been beset by an armed conflict since the 1970s, which worsened in the late 1980s when right-wing paramilitary groups clashed with leftist guerrillas. This armed



Figure 3. Area of study: trade mobilities between metropolitan Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio de Táchira (Venezuela). Source: Figure composition and legend placement: Yvonne Riaño. Map data: Google ©2021, https://www.google.com/maps/search/cucuta+san+antonio/@7.8378349,-72.4708324,14.42z.

struggle for control of the cocaine economy has displaced thousands of rural families, as members of both groups typically enter smallholder farms and villages and threaten to kill the inhabitants if they do not vacate their homes. There is no forceful response from the national or departmental governments (El Espectador 2021; Ríos Sierra 2017). Consequently, the studied population migrated to Venezuela around 2000, seeking security and attracted by the economic opportunities from rising oil prices and then-President Hugo Chavez's social policies. These traders started transnational businesses, importing clothing, jewellery, souvenirs and gifts from Colombia to Venezuela. The Venezuelan government's *laissez-faire* approach to Colombians crossing the border changed radically in 2015, when President Nicolás Maduro closed the official border between Colombia and Venezuela following an attack on Venezuela's soldiers, presumably by Colombian paramilitaries. Car traffic ceased, and the pedestrian passage of goods across the International Simon Bolívar Bridge (see Figure 3 above) was rigorously controlled. The closure also led to the persecution of Colombians living in Venezuela, 25,000 of whom were arbitrarily and violently deported (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2018; El País 2018). These events practically annulled the legal cross-border trade between Cúcuta and San Antonio between 2015 and 2022. Furthermore, the political, economic, and social crisis that began in Venezuela in 2013 – and worsened in 2015 due to a lack of investment and falling oil prices – resulted in hyperinflation, increased poverty, food and medicine shortages, human rights abuses, and social unrest, leading millions of Venezuelans to emigrate. Between two and three million Venezuelans came to Colombia (Malamud and Núñez 2019). Most initially arrived in Cúcuta, where those who have stayed there currently compete with Colombians for jobs in an area that has little employment and has been neglected by Colombia's central government.

Following the border closure, suitcase traders did not stop trading. They resisted the imposed spatial immobility by moving along the informal *trocha*, which involves crossing the Táchira River on foot and then proceeding along an improvised path through the jungle (Riaño 2022). The *trocha* is considered illegal by the governments of both countries, which view the transport of goods (food, handicrafts, textiles, furniture, art, and petrol) via such routes as smuggling. Despite its 'illegality', various regimes control human mobility and the passage of goods along the *trocha*. On the Colombian side, law enforcement has been largely absent. On the Venezuelan side, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), an influential Colombian guerrilla group, works with the Venezuelan Guard to control crossings in a form of 'criminal governance' (Lessing 2021), threatening passersby with their lives if they do not pay them a passage 'tax'. Recurrent killings and rapes occur, as does violence stemming from the conflict between Colombian guerrillas and paramilitaries. Passing through the *trocha* thus involves great risks for suitcase traders, as Mariana Pérez states:

> The paramilitaries have always been on the *trocha*, and they impose their regime. We have to do what they demand […] For example, they impose on us that if they need your motorbike, we must give it to them.

The Colombian paramilitaries used to exercise control over the *trocha* until 2018 when the ELN guerrillas took over. José Pedraza describes how this shift affected traders:

> Rain or shine, you have to work. Sometimes there is a shoot-out [between guerrillas and paramilitaries], and you have to run because if you damage the merchandise you have to pay for it … Still, the guerrillas arrived and brought a bit of order, because the paramilitaries were killing people …

Given this context, the stability of the cross-border trade economy and the clandestine spatial mobilities it entails are very fragile and depend on the geopolitical situation at the border.

4. Suitcase trading: mobilities, connections, meanings

In this section, we introduce the main empirical results for the two case studies for each of the three studied dimensions: *mobilities*, *connections*, and *meanings*.

4.1. Mobilities

In the 1980s, suitcase trading between Peru and Brazil was more structured and widespread than today. By that time, some handicrafters, mostly men,[4] started travelling to São Paulo individually as suitcase traders, first crossing the Peru-Bolivia border and then the Bolivia-Brazil border. Esteban Vilca, a craftsman from the rural district of Pisaq (34 km. from Cusco), would travel on the Cusco-Puno train, then take a bus to the city of Desaguadero (Bolivia) and hop aboard a truck to Santa Cruz. From there, he would continue his journey by bus to Corumbá (a Brazilian city on the border with Bolivia), then further to São Paulo. At that time, bus travel was affordable, but these trips took nearly a week and were risky, as some roads were dangerous and unpaved.

At first, suitcase traders drew on informal strategies, since they did not declare their goods and therefore did not pay taxes. As Oscar Huamán recalls: 'We travelled with suitcases. You had to do it little by little, so it was difficult'. However, after a few years, Peruvian traders started to use regular channels for commercial importation. This shift signalled the eventual formalisation of the entrepreneurs' commercial activities in São Paulo: setting up a formal business, obtaining a company name, and, as a prerequisite, regularising their migratory status as residents.

As for the types of goods transported, cross-border traders initially brought handicrafts produced in Cusco (Figure 4) and other wares purchased in Bolivia during their journey. Later on, they would buy semi-precious stones in Brazil and other materials to produce handicraft jewellery (which was sought-after in Peru), leading to two-way trade. These mobility practices should be understood within the context of a growing regional demand for handicrafts in South America during the 1980s (Izaguirre 2019). Pedro Choque, for example, travelled to São Paulo from Pisaq for the first time as a high school student on the advice of a Brazilian handicraft buyer. He set out with a couple of suitcases and returned to Peru with a $6,000 profit: 'During the '80s, I travelled ten times a year. I got lucky and met a Brazilian buyer who could buy $100,000 of merchandise in an hour'. Oscar recalls similar success with clay necklaces: 'We used to bring a small suitcase, and we came home with $1,000, which was a lot of money at the time'. Handicraft production and trade became widespread, as only a small economic investment was needed. Most craftspeople from



Figure 4. Informal cross-border trade: a Peruvian suitcase trader who typically produces handicrafts in his workshop in Pisaq (Cusco, Peru) and regularly travelled to São Paulo (Brazil) to sell clay necklaces. Source: Photograph by Lorena Izaguirre, Pisaq 2016.

this era entered the bustling transnational craft trade at a very young age (between 17 and 25, often right after finishing secondary school), starting a tradition of craftsmen travelling to neighbouring countries (Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, and Colombia) to sell and buy.

By comparison, suitcase traders between Colombia and Venezuela move across much shorter distances, as only 1 km separates Cúcuta's periphery (Colombia) from San Antonio (Venezuela). The short distances involved determine the various mobilities of suitcase traders (c.f. Lacaze 2010), of whom three types can be observed. The first are porters who *use their bodies* to transport goods between Colombia and Venezuela. Known locally as *maleteros*, they are primarily young and early middle-aged men who carry up to 120 kilos on their backs. There are also some women, although they transport fewer goods. Since the Táchira River is shallow most of the year, traders cross it on foot. During rainy periods, however, this crossing becomes very dangerous. Sometimes traders work in groups of 4–6 men, pushing a cart to carry larger quantities of goods. José Pedraza, who sells alcohol from Venezuela in Colombia and imports plastic furniture, foodstuffs, medicines, and electrical appliances from Colombia to sell in Venezuela, explains the dangers of these daily mobilities:

> You have to put 120 kilos on your ribs, and they pay 16,000 pesos (4.12 US) per trip, but there is a risk that the police will catch you or that the Colombian police will take the merchandise away from me, and on the other side (Venezuela) the guerrillas and the Venezuelan guards are in charge. It is like playing cat and mouse, the work is quite hard.

The second type are porters using *carts, bicycles, and motorbikes* (Figure 5), and they generally have more money. When motorbikers reach an improvised bridge over the Táchira River, they have to place the goods on bicycles, as the guerrillas who built and now control the bridge ban



Figure 5. Informal cross-border trade: Colombian *Maleteros* using carts to carry goods between Colombia and Venezuela across the *trocha*. Source: Photograph by Yvonne Riaño, *La trocha*, 2019.

motorbikes. Many porters work in a team, with one person coordinating the complex logistics of collecting, transporting, and delivering the goods. Mariana Pérez initially transported goods on foot, then by bicycle and motorbike; she now handles logistics. She coordinates a group of four *maleteros* – her husband, mother, and two other porters – who each carry 150 kilos of goods across the border on a motorcycle, including alcohol, food, supplies, and medicines. She explains her daily routine.

> … [large traders] call me and say, "Look, I need you to pass this to me … " That is in my house, and from there I say [to the porters], "Look, love, load this, load that," and I come here to see if the police are there because they could take the goods away … I also have to check that the goods arrive [safely] at the destination where they need to be delivered.

The third type are former *maleteros* who now produce handicrafts and pay others to transport and trade them in Venezuela or Colombia. Sara Baquero, who runs a mini shop in Cúcuta selling stationery and self-made decorations, used to travel with a suitcase to Venezuela via public transport to sell her wares. However, she experienced many difficulties with the Venezuelan guards at the checkpoints: ' … *they have tried to take my merchandise away, but I fight to the last. [*I tell them*] that I come from so far away, that it is not fair, that my family needs it'.* After the border closed, she delegated the transport duties to one of her former street vendors' friends in Venezuela who regularly comes to Cúcuta to buy her handicrafts.

Interestingly, all three types of *maleteros* exemplify economic 'globalisation from below', or the grassroots practices of actors with limited capital who move goods and people across national borders, thus creating small transnational enterprises (Riaño et al. 2024).

In summary, our case studies of *mobilities* reveal novel findings. In both cases, the *dynamics* of mobilities change over time, and with them the nature of the transnational spaces involved. Whereas suitcase-trading Peruvians engaged in pendular mobilities between Cusco and São Paulo during the 1980s, most of them have now settled in Brazil and travel frequently to Peru and other countries (e.g. China, Thailand, and India) to conduct business. Pendular mobilities were a path to upward social mobility for a younger male generation eager to leave their rural communities. The strict Brazilian migration regime enhanced pendular mobilities for over a decade, sustaining a transnational space that persisted even after Peruvians settled in Brazil. Furthermore, the Brazilian tax regime shaped the nature of informal trade during that time. In the second case, Colombian traders who migrated to Venezuela in the 2000s and established themselves there as entrepreneurs were forced to become pendular suitcase traders in 2015 due to the changing geopolitical context and forced displacement by the Venezuelan government. Suitcase trading subsequently became a subsistence strategy to secure their livelihoods and avoid political violence. Meanwhile, the transnational space between Cúcuta and San Antonio has survived multiple efforts by the Venezuelan government and other violent armed groups to restrict cross-border mobility.

We thus conclude that transnational spaces change in character over time (c.f. Torres and Herrera 2014), depending on how geopolitical contexts, trade demand, infrastructure quality, tax and migration regimes, and the social position of traders evolve. Furthermore, we highlight how mobilities are shaped by geographical location and geographical distance. The circulatory distance for Peruvians did not impede mobility, as traders travelled by train and bus. However, for Colombians, the extremely short geographical distance between trading locations allowed for a wider variety of mobilities, including by foot, bicycle, motorcycle, bus, or by delegating the task.

Concerning the material structures in which cross-border trade takes place, poor mobility infrastructure did not discourage cross-border circulation. Improving roads and bus connections between Peru and Brazil eased circulation, whereas, along the Colombia–Venezuela border, *trocha* passages along makeshift roads continued despite no government maintenance. Today, circulation is aided by WhatsApp, which is of paramount importance to Colombian and Peruvian cross-border traders.

4.2. Connections

The circulation pattern between Peru (Cusco) and Brazil (São Paulo) was initially based on suitcase traders travelling alone and learning through repeated trips. Some pioneers of this cross-border trade leveraged recommendations from Brazilian buyers who purchased handicrafts in Cusco and advised them on where to sell them in São Paulo. Their first trips were crucial in establishing these future business contacts. Over time, suitcase traders built networks on their own, relying on Brazilian and foreign traders operating in São Paulo.

Nonetheless, challenges remained. During the 1990s, places like Pisaq were abuzz with the success of Peruvian handicrafts in Brazil, but suitcase traders who had the necessary information (routes, custom controls, strategies for border crossing, and contacts of buyers in São Paulo) did not share it with others, not even their relatives. Thus, cross-border trade remained an individual pursuit. In another challenge, Brazilian customs officers were increasingly seizing products from suitcase traders, and smuggling could also lead to incarceration, as it did for Pedro Choque's relative:

> In 1986, my relative was taken to jail … When I arrived in São Paulo, he was in Campo Grande prison for two months. But we never recovered the merchandise; I think it was worth $120,000. We lost [it]. After that, I stopped travelling.

Moreover, in order to make several annual trips, cross-border traders stopped crafting the goods themselves and delegated the production to family networks in Cusco. Yet these personal production networks could not maintain the pace of demand. During the Peruvian handicrafts boom in São Paulo in the late 1980s, the most successful traders operated workshops in Cusco with up to 500 locally recruited workers. In the mid-1990s, when suitcase logistics made it hard to scale up production and increase profit, the most successful traders moved their production from Cusco to São Paulo. They used their transnational networks to recruit and relocate a mobile labour force.

Similarly, in the Colombia to Venezuela trade, social connections are essential for suitcase traders to secure transportation orders from large-scale traders or individuals and to store, transport, and sell goods. Social connections can be socially and geographically proximate (e.g. family, friends, and co-workers) or more distant (e.g. traders, police officers, guerrilla group members). Mariana Pérez, for example, lives with her family in a house in San Antonio (Venezuela), and the goods she procures in Colombia to sell in Venezuela are deposited in another home, rented by her mother-in-law in Cúcuta (Colombia) near the border. As illegal mobilities in this region are controlled by armed actors, contact with the police and guerrilla members is crucial. Dissidents of the former FARC guerrillas, as well as the still-operational ELN, operate in Venezuela without being bothered by Venezuelan state security forces because they share revolutionary, economic (the ELN charges right-of-way fees), and strategic (Venezuela is a sanctuary for the guerrillas) aims. Mariana says that she negotiates the 'tax' that guerrillas charge for her transporting goods along the *trocha* daily, always with the same *guerrillero*, a man whom she once helped with his health problems. Mariana also has friends among the few policemen on patrol who let her operate freely, and, having worked on the *trocha* for ten years, has developed many connections with large-scale traders. Like many *maleteros*, Mariana travels multiple times a day along the *trocha*, informally maintaining the cross-border socioeconomic links between Venezuela and Colombia.

As for *connections*, both transnational spaces are produced and reproduced through networks of trust on both sides of the border and through transnational exchanges between mobile and immobile people (e.g. traders, local buyers and consumers, police and customs officers, etc.), a phenomenon that has received insufficient attention. In both contexts, cross-border traders have room to manoeuvre due to the corrupt, informal, and illegal practices characterising border zones, as is also the case in West Africa (Fadahunsi and Rosa 2002) and Mexico (Gauthier 2007). Informal connections exist at all stages of the suitcase trade, from manufacturing and transporting the products to negotiating the border crossing and distributing them in another country.

In the Peru-Brazil case, these connections enabled the delocalisation of handicraft production from Cusco to São Paulo and allowed traders to recruit and mobilise labour. Furthermore, both cases demonstrate the global dimension of informal trade, as the goods produced in Colombia and Peru are informally transported and clandestinely traded across Brazil, Bolivia, and Venezuela (see also Jimenez 2021).

Cross-border traders resort to informality to obtain an income and circumvent their disadvantaged social positions in their contexts of origin. However, the boundary between informality and formality is murky, as in Colombia's case, suitcase traders often work for large-scale traders (c.f. Hung and Ngo 2019). Furthermore, mobility is embedded in geographically and temporally contingent power relations (gender, nationality, class, age) (Cresswell 2010; Riaño et al. 2015) that necessarily affect the conditions of mobility and, ultimately, the nature of transnational spaces. Thus, the transnational spaces we analysed are marked by intersecting inequalities. In the Peru-Brazil case, cross-border trade was primarily a strategy for young, smallholder and working-class, mainly male handcrafters to gain upward social mobility. In the Colombia–Venezuela case, a few working-class women also carry out cross-border trade but experience more challenges. They must often balance their trading with unpaid care work and experience significant threats of abuse and rape by illegal armed groups and others. Research in West Africa (Wrigley-Asante and Frimpong 2023) and Asia (Cieślewska 2013) has yielded similar results.

One issue that needs to be explored further is why there are more women suitcase traders in Colombia than in Peru. Possibly, the short distance between Cúcuta and San Antonio plays a key role, and the border between Colombia and Venezuela seems a more 'familiar' space in which, despite existing dangers, suitcase traders have friends, relatives, and sometimes homes on both sides of the border. The number of Colombian women working in suitcase trading is also increasing, as it represents one of the few opportunities to survive in a difficult geopolitical context and achieve empowerment, as is the case in West Africa (Wrigley-Asante and Frimpong 2023) and Asia (Piart 2013) as well. In contrast, in the case of Cusco (Peru), a tourist area with greater income-earning possibilities for women, the week-long journey through the Andes and on unpaved roads by bus seems more feasible for young men, as they are better equipped to endure the hardships of such a trip and typically do not yet have any childcare responsibilities that would complicate their extended absence of up to a month. Finally, whereas in the Peru-Brazil case, repeated mobilities and circulation led to a significant upward social mobility, in the Colombia–Venezuela case, people seem 'stuck' making daily crossings for subsistence.

4.3. Meanings

The circulation dynamics of cross-border traders are fuelled by aspirations to travel abroad. Specifically, tourism in Cusco instilled a curiosity towards foreigners and foreign countries, and trade circulations enabled craftsmen to discover new realities. As Esteban puts it: 'My goal was not to travel, but the fact that I was in contact with them [tourists] made me want to go'. Towards the end of the 1990s, cross-border circulation responded directly to the increasing demand for handicrafts in Brazil. Thanks to cross-border trade, Brazil – and São Paulo in particular – entered the geographical imaginaries of suitcase traders as a place of economic success. An emergent class of petty capitalists appropriated the labour surplus of the workers they employed in Peru, and reproduced their pendular mobility pattern by transmitting images of material success to others. Furthermore, becoming a successful suitcase trader enabled them to distinguish themselves from their parents (most of them smallholders) and their rural-anchored values.

Suitcase traders' circulation also configured a space of permanent connection between Cusco (Pisaq in particular) and São Paulo. In contemporary Pisaq, everyone knows somebody who has travelled to or lived in São Paulo because of the handicraft trade. A few people continue working as suitcase traders even though the handicrafts boom in São Paulo ceased at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many of the pioneers of this trade are now wholesale traders settled in São

Paulo. They made investments in Pisaq (e.g. properties, shops, and land) and continue to travel frequently for trade and holidays. Most of them have Brazilian-born children but hope to retire in Cusco.

Regarding informal trade between Colombia and Venezuela, the border area represents a key space for socioeconomic survival. Job competition is fierce in Cúcuta, as it has one of the highest unemployment rates among Colombian cities and is the main destination for Venezuelan immigrants fleeing their country. The *trocha* is thus one of the few areas where poor Colombians and Venezuelans can earn an income. Many Venezuelans and thousands of Colombians living in San Antonio, including *maleteros*, travel daily through the short *trocha* to Colombia to receive medical and educational services, while Venezuelan children cross with their mothers to attend Colombian schools. The route creates a critical transnational space with a multi-local and binational sense of belonging.

At the same time, armed violence pervades the *trocha* and can instil fear. As Yolanda Buitrago explains:

> One day I was crossing the trocha with my children. There was a shootout. We ran off quickly. The *maleteros* protected us … but that is our life … we live by the hand of God.

For this reason, Mariana Pérez, has been studying to prepare herself for a safer, better job:

> There is a part of my brain that tells me that one day I might die on the *trocha*, because there are many people envious of my work … The *trocha* work has given me enough to eat, but I don't want my children to end up like me or my husband.

In sum, suitcase traders produce *social meaning* while circulating in physical space. In the Peru-Brazil case, mobility is associated with a desire for adventure and exploration. Cross-border traders were eager to access a more cosmopolitan lifestyle than that of their parents. The emerging transnational space is thus marked by imaginaries of success sustained by the discourses and practices of pioneer traders. In the Colombia–Venezuela case, cross-border mobility was an act of resistance against spatial immobility imposed by political and armed violence (Riaño 2022). The transnational space shaped by Colombian traders is both a familiar area of trade and family and friendship networks and a site of fear, political instability, and violence. As in Africa (Titeca and Kimanuka 2012) and Asia (Piart 2013), transnational space becomes an area in which people fight for economic survival and to gain access to basic services unavailable on their side of the border. Lastly, the transnational spaces created by suitcase trading contribute to the social and economic integration of bordering countries, even in cases of geopolitical tension and closed borders, as with the Colombia–Venezuela frontier.

5. Conclusions: how transnational spaces are created and sustained by suitcase traders

We explored how Peruvian and Colombian suitcase traders establish and sustain transnational spaces by engaging in repeated trade activities between Peru and Brazil and Colombia and Venezuela. We contribute to the literature on suitcase trading by studying the phenomenon in South America, where knowledge on this topic is scant. Furthermore, we expand our understanding of transnational spaces by proposing an analytical framework to empirically study the practice of suitcase trade from a *spatialities* perspective. This perspective combines three distinct yet interlinked dimensions: *mobilities, connections, and meanings.*

In both case studies, suitcase trading is based on a transnational exchange of goods dependent on the local, context-specific demand. Yet, the economic and geopolitical context of the cases differs significantly. Peruvian suitcase traders took advantage of border differentials during the handicrafts business boom in South America, profiting from the higher price for handicrafts in Brazil and parity between the Brazilian currency and the U.S. dollar. By contrast, Colombian traders benefitted from the short distance between transnational trade locations and the increased demand for everyday

consumer goods during the recent economic crisis in Venezuela. In addition, the geopolitical tension between Colombia and Venezuela led to the closure of the official border crossing by the Venezuelan government. This created new income opportunities for suitcase traders as the illegal *trocha* crossings became the main way to transport goods between the two countries. In both cases, cross-border trade links legal, illegal, formal, and informal practices. Informality is largely determined by tax regimes, which disadvantage micro traders by cutting into their profits. Illegality is the norm, as traders need to pay bribes to border officials or guerrillas to trade any goods, whether legal or illegal. Therefore, we need to question any sharp distinction made between informal and formal trade, as they are closely linked.

Repeated transnational *mobilities* are an essential element of traders' livelihoods and underpin the emergence of transnational spaces. Our results reveal the dynamic character of the *mobilities* shaping such spaces. In early years, Peruvian traders practised pendular mobilities between Cusco (Peru) and São Paulo (Brazil), but as they improved their social position, they later settled in São Paulo and only occasionally engaged in pendular mobilities. By contrast, Colombian traders originally settled and operated their businesses in Venezuela before beginning to conduct daily pendular movements between Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio del Táchira (Venezuela). The concept of pendular mobilities has great potential for the study of spatialities, as travel frequency and geographical distance impact the strength and density of the social networks that support such social practices and shape the meanings that traders attribute to mobility. Transnational spaces, and the mobilities that shape them, also change in character over time, depending on how geopolitical contexts, trade demand, infrastructure quality, tax and migration regimes, and traders' social position evolve. Transnational spaces are thus dynamic, historically contingent social processes, which may be seen 'as an irregular process, alternating moments of lesser and greater intensity' (Torres and Herrera 2014, 170). Moreover, mobilities are shaped by geographical location and geographical distance, affecting the frequency and means of transport and the spatial concentration of traders. Further research is needed to grasp the evolutionary dynamics of different kinds of transnational spaces.

Our results also show that the socio-spatial *connections* that structure transnational spaces are produced and reproduced by networks of trust including family, friends and *paisanos,* as well as guerrillas and policemen, situated on both sides of the border. These networks can be sustained over vast geographical distances (Cusco-São Paulo) or through daily visits to neighbouring areas (Cúcuta-San Antonio). As noted, distance affects the density of social connections and thus the durability of transnational spaces. Also, connections are made between mobile and immobile people, especially through digital communication and information technologies, an issue that deserves future attention. Furthermore, connections are embedded in power relations that affect the nature of transnational spaces. The Peruvian traders were young working-class men who mostly achieved commercial success in Brazil, which shows the value of spatial mobility for social mobility (Riaño, Mittmasser, and Sandoz 2022). The opposite is true for Colombian traders, who have only been able to eke out a living, partly because of the challenges arising from geopolitical conflict. Also, women traders face more challenges, including threats of abuse and rape than men, and often have to perform unpaid care work as well.

Lastly, our results show that the *meanings* associated with transnational spaces change significantly from one case to the other. Suitcase traders moving between Cusco and São Paulo are looking for adventure and economic success. For Colombian traders, the meanings are multiple and sometimes contradictory. They are associated with resistance to the spatial immobility across borders that resulted from armed and state violence. Fear is another element, as traders must circulate in spaces controlled by extortive and violent illegal armed groups. At the same time, the transnational space between Cúcuta and San Antonio is familiar, since the short geographic and cultural distance favours close friendship and family ties across borders. Traders' daily lives are therefore transnational because they work, sleep, and trade in either Colombia or Venezuela. In both cases, however,

transnational spaces offer opportunities for economic survival by exploiting cross-border market differences.

Overall, our study has shown that transnational space is not simply an abstract notion in which transnational social practices occur. Rather, it is structured by frequent or occasional spatial mobilities along specific routes and means, by particular cross-border socioeconomic connections between distant and proximate localities, and by the meanings that mobile individuals attribute to their transnational socio-spatial practices. Moreover, understanding how suitcase traders draw on transnational mobilities, connections, and meanings is a fruitful way of exploring transnational spaces from below, thus revealing forms of agency that remain otherwise overlooked.

Finally, our results highlight the advantages of using a mobility perspective over a migration perspective to consider cross-border traders (Riaño 2022). Even if suitcase traders migrate to another country at an earlier or later stage of their trading careers, using a migration perspective would only capture a specific moment in their lives, overlooking the totality of their life-long repeated movements between countries to trade. The mobility perspective seems therefore more apt to gain deep insight into informal cross-border trade, especially in the Global South, where repeated mobilities across national borders are key to many people's survival.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. This generation of craftspeople benefited from the economic transformations in Brazil in the 1980s, caused by the economic reform policies of the Washington Consensus and the establishment of the *Plano Real*, which sought the stabilisation and renewal of the Brazilian economy. For a few months in 1994, following the change of currency, the *real* equalled the U.S. dollar in value, which was very profitable for their business.
3. The Spanish term *paisano* refers to people who recognise themselves as being from the same village, district, or region.
4. During fieldwork, Lorena Izaguirre heard from a few craftswomen travelling as suitcase traders in the early 1990s. However, she was not able to gain access to them for interviews.

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ORCID

Lorena Izaguirre http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9647-0768
Yvonne Riaño http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3463-6977

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