Tradition, Adventure, and Pleasure in Santiago, Chile’s Informal Markets
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A young woman approached a clothing vendor’s stall with her two small children.

Julio: [Shuffles index cards until finding the right one.] ‘Mrs. Perez, right?’

Mrs. Pérez smiles, nods, and hands him some money.

Julio: ‘Paying up for this week?’

Mrs. Pérez: ‘Yes.’

Julio: ‘Thanks. How have you been?’

Mrs. Pérez: ‘Great. The kids have winter vacation this week, so the other day we went to the mall and saw “Shrek” – have you seen it?’

Julio: ‘No, but I’ve heard of it.’

Mrs. Pérez: ‘We thought it was really funny. Afterwards, we stayed for lunch. It was a great time!’

She examines the sweaters hanging in the stall, feeling the fabric, and checking the size. She points to one.

Mrs. Pérez: ‘Oh, that one looks nice. How much?’

Julio: ‘It’s made of really good material, too. Ten dollars. Take a look.’

Mrs. Pérez: ‘It looks really nice. I’ve got to go talk to my husband after he gets off of work. How late will you be here?’

Julio: ‘I’m here until 2 today, and then I’m back on Saturday if you miss me.’

Mrs. Pérez: ‘OK, I’ll come back. Bye, casero [shopkeeper].’

Julio: ‘Bye, Mrs. Perez.’
She returned a short while later and purchased the shirt (Field notes, Santiago, Chile, 27 July 2001).

Scholars argue that Chileans are increasingly individualistic, hedonistic, and status conscious consumers attracted to a growing shopping mall, department store, and big box grocery chain sector (Moulián, 1997, 1998; Tironi, 2002; Márquez, 2003; Dammert, 2004; Tórche, 1998). Yet the above exchange in a Santiago, Chile neighborhood street market underscores the complex social dynamics of consumption in alternative settings missed in scholarly accounts. The extract illustrates how consumers and vendors engage in “relational work” (Zelizer, 2005), which simultaneously favors their strategic goals in the market encounter and draws them into deep and wide ranging affective ties. Mrs. Pérez works to gain Julio’s trust in order to access credit and favorable payment arrangements while Julio maintains a friendly demeanor to retain her loyalty and patronage. In this process, Mrs. Pérez shares details of her family life and refers to her married status and the negotiations it implies, while both have a pleasurable exchange.

This example underscores the need to understand the diverse elements of public consumption in Santiago, Chile’s street and flea markets as distinct from shopping in standardized mall and chain store environments. With this goal in mind, I draw on ethnographic observation of shopping practices and the meanings of consumption as found in street and flea markets as well as semi-structured interviews conducted in Santiago, Chile between 2001 and 2006.¹

Chile’s changing retail environment since the 1973 military coup, but particularly since civilians took over government in 1990, might suggest that traditional markets are
decreasing in importance as shopping venues. The liberalization of trade and land markets under the dictatorship lowered the relative prices of imported consumer goods and created incentives for shopping mall and big-box store construction. During the 1990s, the expanded availability of credit cards to middle and lower income groups also widened the array of non-essential goods available to the poor. With rising wages and easy credit, Chileans at all income levels began to purchase more sophisticated durable goods, increase their debts and frequent western style stores (Cáceres and Farías, 1999; Sabatini and Arenas, 2000; Cámara de Comercio de Santiago, 1996; CEP, 2001; Consumers International, 2000; Frigolett and Sanhueza, 1999; INE, 1999; Moulián, 1997, 1998; Schkolnik, 1983).

Nonetheless, in 2002, small traditional stores and street markets sold almost half of all food and personal items (D’Andrea, Stenger, and Goebel-Krstelj, 2004, pp. 4-5). Neighborhood street markets, which predate the 16th Century Spanish conquest of Chile, have more than $2 billion in officially recorded annual sales, and the metropolitan region hosts over 400 street markets (Salazar, 2003). These markets form part of Chile’s informal economy, which makes up almost 1/3 of the urban economically active population (Portes and Hoffman, 2003: 56). Thus, Santiago’s new retail infrastructures and practices coexist with significant traditional venues that have distinctive characteristics.

Understanding the complex dynamics of consumption in Santiago’s street and flea markets will help rectify an emphasis on the surface features of new retail forms that seems to indicate that Chileans are becoming more like the common image of hedonistic, status-conscious middle class western consumers (Campbell, 1987 [2005], 2004; Schor,
1998; for critiques, see Miller, 1998; Miller, et al. 1998, and Zukin, 2004). Yet analyses of consumers in México (García Canclini, 2001), Brazil (O’Dougherty, 2002), Trinidad (Miller, 1997) and Ecuador (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1999) demonstrate that they are engaged in a complex negotiation between global and local identities, attempt to reinforce or reinvent their class and ethnic affiliations via consumption, and improvise creative strategies to retain locally meaningful consumption-based identities.

Following this focus on locally meaningful consumption practices, I contrast the distinct, but overlapping genres of shopping in Santiago’s street and flea markets. Miller (1997, p. 301) argues that these genres are distinctive aspects of shopping present in different retail locales, such as tourist areas, corner stores, or shopping malls. In Santiago, street markets are intimate settings in which ritualized weekly purchases help shoppers form strong social bonds with particular vendors, shoppers there feel comfortable engaging in playful joking, consumers make purchases to satisfy family members’ daily needs or to purchase gifts, and shoppers buy goods for resale. Shoppers engage in intensive relational work (Zelizer, 2005), by cultivating long-term ties with vendors, purchasing provisions or gifts for family, and visiting with neighbors. Through these activities, they reinforce gender and generational categories and relationships (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979[1996]: 38-39) and become skillful shoppers. Shoppers also engage in creative “tactics” (De Certeau, 1984) whereby they recycle goods or purchase ingredients for preparation and resale.

Flea market shopping is primarily focused on the challenge and excitement of the “hunt” for bargains, used goods (for collections or resale), and stolen goods to be repurchased (Prus and Dawson, 1991; Sherry, 1990b; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry,
Shoppers and vendors are engaged in competitive, short-term transactions in which guile and deceit are ever-present. Shoppers also enjoy a carnivalesque street scene full of performances and itinerant vendors, in which consuming the “spectacle” appears more appealing than consuming goods (Sherry, 1990b; Falk, 1997; Lehtonen and Mäenpää, 1997).

These two environments demonstrate that shopping is a challenging, pleasurable and meaningful activity in which multiple logics operate simultaneously. Shopping cannot be reduced to the single logic of individuals’ search for status (Schor, 1998), pleasure and novelty (Campbell, 1987 [2005], 2004), or the fulfillment of family obligations (Miller, 1998). Moreover, shopping is situated in specific territorial and relational contexts that fundamentally shape consumers’ practices and understandings of these activities (Gregson and Crewe, 2003: chs. 2-3). While these findings are specific to alternative markets, they have implications for standardized retail venues like grocery stores or malls (see Miller et al., 1998). The results call for an understanding of how the relational contexts of specific retail sites shape the character and meaning of shopping.

**Relational Work in Street Markets**

Street markets are settings where shoppers meet weekly with their regular vendors and with neighbors and thus sustain relationships that are simultaneously practical and intimate. These long-term ties allow vendors and shoppers to mark the passing of time through transitions and rites-of-passage within their families; familiarity also encourages playfulness and the use of humor. The family context for shopping predominates given consumers’ focus on food and gift purchases as well as the ingredients for food prepared at home for resale.
Shoppers meet weekly with their regular vendors and neighbors in street markets and thus sustain simultaneously practical and intimate relationships. For women, who are the markets’ principal consumers, building and maintaining relationships with friends, family, and vendors is a principal element of shopping; and shopping, in turn, intensifies these relationships (Douglas and Isherwood 1979[1996]: 37; Miller 1998; Zelizer 2005; Dimaggio and Louch, 1998). Additionally, shoppers use creative “tactics” (De Certeau 1984) to recycle found objects for use in the market, while others purchase ingredients for home preparation and resale (compare Gregson and Crewe, 2003: ch. 5).

Predating the Spanish conquerors’ arrival in the 16th century and having survived political repression in the 19th century, neighborhood farmers’ markets were legalized in 1939 to control food prices by a center-left administration, though small-scale merchants replaced farmers as the majority of vendors (Salazar 2003). Today, almost all Santiago neighborhoods in mixed- and low-income areas have street markets (ferias) operating on a given street on specified days of the week. Though originally fresh food markets, today, processed foods, household goods, clothing, and entertainment items are sold. Licensed vendors (feriantes), who pay an annual fee to their local government office, park their cars or pickup trucks and set up tables in front with a tarp or awning overhead. Processed food and household goods salespeople have more elaborate, store-like carts, as do fish and meat salespeople. Unlicensed vendors (coleros) lay their products on blankets on the ground, tend to work alone, squat at the market entrance or along adjacent streets (where police may remove them), and sell clothes, recorded music and films, and small electronic items (Salazar, 2003: 87-89; Leemira Consultores, 2004: 6-7, 126-27, 132; Stillerman 2006).
Family members conduct daily shopping for produce, meat and fish, medicine, and household items. Multi-generational families, groups of young women, or young mothers with children are the primary weekday shoppers, though young and elderly men (the former sometimes riding bicycles) are also present. Weekend shoppers include entire families or groups of friends, and crowds are much larger.

In my observations of social processes in ferias and flea markets, I relied on the good will of shoppers who allowed me to accompany them through the markets and/or vendors with whom I conversed in their stalls while they were working. I had developed entrée with these individuals via referrals from other researchers or through preexisting personal relationships. In the ferias, shoppers confront a lively and pleasant ambience, which includes the smells of fresh produce, fish, and barbecued food, the din of music or soccer games played on the radio, and the characteristic calls of produce vendors who utilize humor to amuse shoppers and thereby attract their attention, or inform customers about sales. For example, a fruit vendor in the southern Santiago Los Carolinos street market frequently calls out ‘Kiwis hay’ (I have kiwi fruit). Because Chileans often do not pronounce the final consonants in words, ‘Kiwis hay’ comes out sounding more like ‘Qué huevai?’ Huevon is a commonly used colloquial term. It literally means “testicle,” but colloquially, it can mean “dude,” “buddy” or “fool,” depending on the context of use. The verb, huevear, can mean fooling around, wasting time, or engaging in an amorous relationship. Hence, ‘Qué huevai?’ means something like, ‘Why are you messing with me?’ -- a question shoppers usually greet with amusement (Field notes, 5 July 2003).

In this context of humor and flirtation, shoppers may initiate sexualized humor, as in the following example. An elderly woman approached a clothing vendor’s stall
holding two bags, one with a shirt to be exchanged, and another containing the remaining crumbs from a **churro**: a fried pastry covered with powdered sugar. She mistakenly gave the vendor’s husband the wrong bag with churro crumbs, and said, laughing, ‘**Le dí el churro,**’ to which the husband replied, ‘**me dió el churrazo,**’ both of which literally mean, ‘I gave you/you gave me the churro.’ Nonetheless, colloquially, churro means ‘good looking’ or ‘attractive’ man. Also, the pastry’s cylindrical shape has phallic connotations. Thus, the woman was embarrassed, and amused, that the vendor’s husband might have interpreted the joke as a “come on.”

Shortly afterward, a younger woman looked at a low cut shirt hanging from the stall and placed it in front of her to check its fit. Laura, the vendor, said, ‘Hi, my dear, what can I do for you?’ She responded, standing directly in front of Laura’s husband, ‘I have to pull this down really low so it fits right’ (laughs). Pablo responded, turning away and smirking, ‘I didn’t say anything.’ The shopper suggested that since the shirt was so low-cut, if she pulled it down to her genital area, it would provide easy access for a sexual encounter: an embarrassing but outrageously funny joke to make to a married man in his wife’s presence (Field notes, 22 December 2005). Our first glance at ferias shows us that play and humor (often with romantic themes) are central to the experience and practice of shopping, which is part of its appeal.

Ferias nonetheless play a central role in household food and clothing provisioning and thus fit into a set of weekly routines and relationships. Customers shop for food and clothing items once or twice a week. In Chile and elsewhere in Latin America, low- and moderate-income shoppers split their food purchases between small, local markets and supermarkets. Shoppers buy fresh produce, bread and meat locally, and bulk goods on a
weekly or monthly basis at supermarkets. Consumers divide purchases in this manner in order to reduce transit costs, purchase foods in smaller, fractionated quantities, and enjoy better quality, fresher, and less expensive produce and bread (Stillerman, 2004; D’Andrea, Stenger, and Goebel-Krstelj, 2004; Bromley, 1998; Salazar, 2003, pp. 87-93; Leemira Consultores, 2004, pp. 6-7, 126-27; Stillerman, 2006; ASOF, 2005).

Women try to ensure they are purchasing high quality and reasonably priced produce and that vendors do not cheat them, developing alliances with specific vendors, who they call *caseros* (Stillerman, 2006; compare Polikoff, 1985 for Cochabamba, Bolivia). Vendors also address their regular customers as *casero* or *casera*. The term originated with door-to-door salesmen selling fresh foods or household items and often extending credit to customers.

Customers develop close, trusting, and long-term relationships with caseros, often jointly observing their children grow up, as customers bring their children to the feria and vendors often rely on family labor. This is particularly true for vendors who sell more expensive items. Here, caseros offer them credit at 40 or 50% interest but allow them to pay off debts in small weekly, biweekly, or monthly installments. As Pablo, a shoe vendor comments, “I offer credit and give the shoes to a customer before they have paid in full if I have known them for a long time. I have known some of my customers since they were little kids” (Field notes, 13 July 2003). Many young mothers are unemployed and hence have neither an independent income nor the qualifications to access department store credit cards. As a consequence, they, along with sporadically employed youth, take advantage of this source of credit. Paying regular installments
creates another ritual similar to the visit to the produce stand. Shoppers visit their merchant-creditors at the market, or the former visit them at home to collect payments.

The long-term ties between merchant creditors and shoppers noted above help notch off short-term and long-term passages of time: shopping is a semi-weekly ritual, and long-term relations with vendors allow shoppers and vendors to share and remark on life transitions (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979 [1996]: 43-44). These credit arrangements also project the relationship into the future and spill over into affective connections, thereby diverging from the image from neoclassical economics that market transactions are one-time, arms-length encounters (Granovetter, 1985; Zelizer, 2005).

Gift purchases in the feria have a different characteristic than routine and ritualized food and clothing purchases. Nonetheless, much like these other purchases, they are often oriented toward the satisfaction of family members’ needs or desires. Gifts are often “treats” (Miller, 1998) given to children, and gift-giving also serves as a medium for asserting family roles and responsibilities (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979 [1996]: 37): I have observed mothers purchase items for their children and then kiss them, thereby reframing an economic transaction as representing an intimate relationship (Field notes, 22 July 2003).

Shoppers also assert their family roles through everyday purchases: Paula and Georgia, her mother-in-law, were shopping for fruit. Paula asked, ‘I bought pepinos [a locally available small melon] over here, are you going to buy them here, too?’ Georgia responded, ‘I don’t like them here, they’re too small. I go to the stall further down.’ Paula turned to me and shrugged her shoulders (Field notes, 5 July 2003). Paula expresses uncertainty about her decision, seeking her mother-in-law’s approval, and
thereby defers to her authority. When Georgia asserts her superior wisdom, Paula withdraws rather than defending her decision, thereby acknowledging Georgia’s authority and judgment.

In another form of relational work, shoppers converse with and offer gifts to friends from their neighborhood. In a visit to a Southern Santiago feria, Raquel, a low-income resident, cheerfully greeted many of the vendors. She had purchased a bag of oranges and offered some of them to several older female shoppers, who gratefully accepted the oranges, peeled and ate them (Field notes, 5 August, 2001). It is also common for shoppers to stop and chat with neighbors they encounter in the feria (Field notes, 3 July 2001). Many vendors and shoppers also describe a visit to the feria as an ‘outing.’

In addition to engaging in relational work, some customers devise creative uses for commodities, or “tactics” (De Certeau, 1984). For example, consumers use recycled goods for carrying groceries or family members. On a number of occasions, I observed shoppers carrying groceries in wheelbarrows or laundry hampers, or pushing a spouse or mother in a wheelbarrow or wheelchair. The appropriation of these makeshift items (De Certeau 1984) would seem out of place in a supermarket or mall, yet they occur without comment in the feria (Field notes, 5 July 2003, 23 December 2005, 22 December 2005).

Many also purchase ingredients in ferias for household preparation and resale. To be successful in such creative entrepreneurship requires prior comparison shopping and the identification of profitable sales venues (compare Morales, 1993; Sherry, 1990b). A college student comments, ‘I sold empanadas [meat pies] at the University and a few housewives prepared them with me. We bought some ingredients at the feria and others
at the supermarket depending on where they were least expensive’ (Field notes, 14 July 2001). Raquel, interviewed above, states: ‘At times I’ve sold food from my home and bought the ingredients in the feria because it’s cheap.’ (Interview, 13 July 2001). She demonstrated her ability at creative self-provisioning when, on a visit to the feria, Raquel purchased cloth to make bed sheets (Field notes, 5 August, 2001).

Street market consumers, as we have seen, are embedded in long-term reciprocal ties through and not in spite of the market. They imbue economic transactions with emotional and relational meaning, all the while appropriating and recycling found objects, and strategically purchasing raw materials for preparation and resale. Shoppers in the ferias, when examined on their own terms and in situ, are not recognizable as the hypothesized hedonistic or status-conscious individual consumer familiar in much consumption theory.

The Thrills of the Hunt and other Pleasures in Flea Markets

In contrast to street market customers, flea market shoppers primarily focus on the search for bargains, unique second-hand goods, or goods for resale. They also partake in a carnivalesque street spectacle. Shoppers and vendors engage in a strategic game to gain value through one-time transactions. Vendors may attempt to gouge naïve shoppers, while the latter may haggle vociferously or frustrate vendors by engaging in comparison shopping or “just looking” (Sherry, 1990b; Wherry, this volume). Unlike street markets, where vendors’ or shoppers’ humor greases the wheels of a sale, attracts customers, or adds a pleasurable element to the shopping experience, much of flea market vendors’ humor is “backstage” commentary (Goffman, 1959) that celebrates having tricked a
customer, or quietly insults shoppers who refuse to make a purchase. When vendors try to lure shoppers with jokes, they often fall flat.

Second hand goods sales within the flea markets include considerable “role fluidity” (Sherry, 1990a, p. 21) in that shoppers may attempt to gain “deals” from naïve vendors on goods intended for resale. These consumers develop a sophisticated understanding of goods’ potential market value, rely on personal networks for sourcing goods, and have extensive knowledge of customers’ tastes and potential resale venues (Sherry 1990b; Gregson and Crewe, 2003, ch. 5).

Used goods sales, by definition, require initial owners to divest themselves of their products (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1988; Gregson and Crewe, 2003, ch. 5). In the flea markets, resale vendors capitalize on the inexperience or personal misfortune of vendors who seek to quickly liquidate their assets. Other vendors sell stolen goods, and theft victims repurchase these goods after learning of their location at the market. Additionally, collectors seek unique or authentic goods to fashion a distinctive identity by displaying these products in their homes (Gregson and Crewe, 2003, ch. 7).

On weekends, there is a festive street environment outside the markets as onlookers crowd the streets to hear free concerts, observe impromptu performances, purchase inexpensive foods and goods on the streets, or as part of a trip to the indoor markets. This outdoor scene is a particularly pronounced example of the festive and carnivalesque element present to a greater or lesser degree in most markets (Sherry, 1990a, pp.16-18), in which one’s sensory experience may be more important than purchasing or using a product (Falk, 1997; Lehtonen and Mäenpää, 1997; Zukin, 2004). In contrast to street markets, where shopping practices reinforce shoppers’ gender and
family identities, this street scene permits the temporary or simulated inversion of social hierarchies—a place where shoppers can experience a momentary sense of freedom from societal controls (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1998; Sherry, 1990a).

Flea markets originated as antique stores near the center of Santiago, but the markets today offer a more diverse array of products. Santiago has several indoor markets; the Bío Bío market observed for this study is the best known and is located in an older neighborhood near downtown Santiago. Vendors work in small stalls in defunct factory buildings that cover about one square mile. Though the Bío Bío began as a street market, the mayor forced vendors indoors during the 1970s and again in 1995 (Salcedo, 2004, p. 95), though a few street vendors today still work on the sidewalks, especially on weekends.

Merchants sell clothing, furniture, computer goods, antiques, tools, and bric-a-brac. Individual vendors or families rent stalls and different types of products are grouped in specific sections of a building or in different buildings. For example, used goods and hardware share space with antiques in some buildings; separate buildings house computers, furniture, and bicycles.

The market sits alongside the city’s former stockyards, which were moved to a peripheral zone in the city in the 1960s, but restaurants, butchers, and fresh fish stores remained in the area. A great deal of the clothes, CDs, and DVDs sold there are evidently pirated merchandise, and citizens widely believe that many of the used goods available at the market are stolen. In addition to its reputation as a thieves’ market, the neighborhood is known for high assault rates, though the markets remain popular shopping destinations.
The markets attract a variety of shoppers whose social backgrounds and lifestyle orientations vary considerably. We conducted most of our observations in a furniture business in the Las Gangas building. This area attracts families (often young couples expecting a child) with varying class backgrounds; a smaller group of wholesale buyers for restaurants or offices are also regular patrons. These shoppers are price conscious, seeking written estimates from different stalls.

Since most shoppers have no long-term attachments to a given vendor or stall, though they may receive a referral, vendors must use their wiles to “reel them in.” They do so with calls emphasizing the quality and low costs of their merchandise, or through flattery or humor, mimicking feriantes to some degree. Transactions are a strategic game between vendors and shoppers as vendors have a reputation for trickery and shoppers have little or no loyalty to individual merchants (Stillerman and Sundt, forthcoming). Vendors may persuade shoppers to purchase an item based on their claims regarding its reputed quality, low delivery fees, warranty, or their willingness to haggle. It is with good reason that shoppers treat vendors with caution, as the latter may hide aesthetic defects in goods or overcharge customers who appear affluent (Field notes, 11 July 2003).

As is true in the ferias, family members shop in groups of two or more; and once they politely gain a vendor’s attention, they ask several questions about price, styles, options, and durability. They often sit on chairs or at tables to test their comfort and durability. After learning of the different available designs, prices, and options, the family members then confer. They may request a price estimate and offer to return. In contrast, if they are convinced they have found the right dining room set or chairs, they will close the
deal, which entails sitting down with the salesperson at a table in the back of the stall in order to pay, receive their receipt, and arrange for pickup or delivery. As sales staff wrap up the chairs and table in plastic to protect it and contact one of the building’s delivery men to arrange for shipment, very often the family members sit or bounce on display chairs and smile or laugh with satisfaction at their new acquisition (Field notes, 24 December 2005).

Based on my many visits to Chileans’ homes during sixteen years’ of travel to the country, I argue that we here see Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) *habitus* at work: these consumers operate within an aesthetic universe that they seek to reproduce due to its familiarity. I would describe the furniture at this stall (and most of the others in Las Gangas) as typical in style for working- and lower middle-class households. Glass or wooden tables are accompanied by straight-backed chairs with aluminum or metal frames and cushions covered with simple, bright designs in cloth, velour or imitation suede. I hypothesize that the satisfaction customers show upon purchasing dining room sets or chairs reflects two phenomena. First, these consumers have identified a style with which they are familiar – it is seen as acceptable and attractive within their milieu. Because it is familiar, and for young families is likely a first-time experience, it may signify either upward mobility to a desired, but familiar social status, or acquisition of a level of comfort achieved by parents or other family members. Hence, the goods function communicatively within these consumers’ family and class contexts (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979[1996]: 38-39, 43).

There are some minor variations on the scenario described above. Self-appointed brokers (or *piratas* [pirates] in the vendors’ lexicon) approach shoppers at the door and
offer to show them furniture at various stalls. If a shopper decides to make a purchase, the sales price includes a ‘finder’s fee’ that the brokers retain and then give the actual sales price to the vendor. Additionally, shoppers may want one item available at a stall, but wish to combine it with another that is either out of stock or not carried by that vendor. Merchants use their personal networks to acquire the desired item at another stall to complete the “combination” for the customers (Field notes, 18 and 26 July 2003).

The dynamic of customer-vendor interactions in the markets is sharply different from the patterns observed in street markets. Shoppers collect cards with estimates from several different shops, seeking the lowest price. Especially when business is slow (as in our 2003 observations when Chile was ending a long recession), vendors become frustrated with buyers’ ability not to make purchases: A couple walked by and commented, “What a nice looking living room set.” As they walked away, a vendor saw a business card in the man’s hand and asked, “What does that card have that we don’t?” (Field notes, 12 July 2003). Manuel, a security guard, echoed vendors’ complaints that shoppers only compare prices but do not purchase goods (Interview, 26 July 2003).

María, the business co-owner, complained about customers’ haggling: ‘We don’t get too many middle and upper class patrons. It’s probably for the best because we’ve had problems with them. They’ll fight you for a $2.00 discount even though they have tons of money. Another wealthy customer gave us a bad check’ (Field notes, 1 July 2001). Consumers’ price conscious orientations, effective haggling, and unwillingness to socialize with vendors would be atypical in the feria setting, where vendors expect shoppers to socialize with them and shoppers assume they are receiving the best price and quality from their casero.
The absence of close, affective vendor-customer ties is also evident in vendors’ use of humor or flirtation, as in the following example: *Three young women approach Israel, the business co-owner, looking for Carlos, a younger employee. Israel opens his arms, as if to hug one of them, smiles, and says, ‘I’m the one you’re looking for!’ The women did not play along with the joke, and asked again when Carlos would return, so Israel responded to their question and they walked away* (Field notes, 11 July 2003).

While these efforts often fell flat, ironic jokes among vendors went over well: *Carlos tried to sell a corner table to an older woman: ‘You can use it to hold a flower vase.’ After she walked away, María turned to me and said, ‘She can use it to hold her dentures’* [we laughed] (Field notes, 26, July 2003). Thus, unlike the humor and romantic play common between shoppers and feria vendors, flea market vendors lack the level of trust and rapport with shoppers for such efforts to be effective. Facing their fragile influence over shoppers, vendors attempt to compensate for their frustration through ironic backstage jokes that express contempt toward shoppers.

The “treasure hunt” is essential to the modus operandi of many shoppers at the Bío Bío markets as well as other less well-known flea markets. As Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1988), Sherry (1990a, 1990b) and Gregson and Crewe (2003) found, one of the chief pleasures and challenges of shopping for used goods is having the ability to differentiate “treasure” from “trash,” and seasoned vendors or customers often take advantage of novice merchants, buying their goods at a large discount. Additionally, purchases of goods for resale and fencing stolen goods are examples of Certeauian tactics whereby consumers appropriate goods creatively (though in these examples, these actions affect subordinate rather than dominant groups). Arturo, an industrial worker who sells
used goods to supplement his income, comments: ‘I once bought an electric generator at the Bío Bío market for $ 400 that was worth $ 3,000. The guy didn’t know what he was selling. You need to look for opportunities. I know what things are worth because I went to trade school – I recognize the manufacturer’s trademark’ (Interview, 24 July 2003).

In addition to knowledge of the market value of used goods, second hand entrepreneurs rely on personal networks to source goods. Thus, Arturo maintains contacts with unlicensed vendors in street markets who identify goods he might wish to purchase for resale. Because his peers share his expertise, they can take advantage of other unlicensed vendors who liquidate their possessions under severe financial pressure. Arturo comments, ‘A lot of the coleros are unemployed young people who need to obtain cash quickly. They don’t know what they’re selling and they practically give the stuff away’ (Interview, 24 July, 2003). Similarly, Raquel, interviewed above, observes, ‘They sell everything in the feria! Sometimes they sell enormous TV sets at such low prices. When people are in bad financial shape, they get desperate and sell their things at ridiculous prices…That’s really sad…Happily, when I was in bad shape, I solved my problems without having to sell my important things’ (Interview, 13 July 2003). Thus, shoppers’ opportunities for purchase and profitable resale are often predicated on others’ misfortunes and sale of prized possessions. This fact underscores the importance of understanding the cultural biographies of goods (Gregson and Crewe, 2003).

Used goods vendors also build their inventory through theft or by acting as fences for thieves. Arturo, quoted above, comments, ‘There are lots of stories about the area. A guy had a car part stolen. He went to Bío Bio to buy a replacement, and he found the part there. One time, a guy had his Rottweiler dog stolen and a friend led him to the person
who had stolen it so that he could buy it back.’ (Interview, 24 July 2003). Similarly, Marcos Medina, a retired industrial worker, recounts: ‘A friend of mine is a carpenter and he had a very expensive tool stolen from his home. He asked around in the neighborhood, and someone brought him to Bío Bío to the thief. He had to go through the humiliation of buying it back because he didn’t have any other choice; he needed the tool to work’ (Interview, 29 July 2003).

Other shoppers seek out novel or peculiar used goods at the Bío Bío and other flea markets. One couple, who are themselves feriantes, comment, ‘We found about 75% of the decorations in our house at the Lo Hermida flea market [an eastern Santiago outdoor flea market]. You need to have a lot of patience, though, to find really nice stuff. They have all kinds of odd and really interesting things here’ (Field notes 28 July 2001). Used goods allow the purchaser to fashion a unique identity built on the aestheticization of nostalgia (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Sherry, 1990b).

In addition to shoppers, the markets attract massive crowds of onlookers on weekends. On numerous occasions when I was leaving the markets in the mid-afternoon on Saturday and Sunday, I was greeted by a “wall” of teenagers and young adults, dressed in rock t-shirts and worn jeans, often eating inexpensive snacks sold on outdoor vending carts. They find in the street an array of activities –outdoor concerts, young men selling puppies, record vendors singing along to the music, street vendors, and a male-to-female transvestite dancer accompanied by a drummer.

The dancer regularly attracted large groups who formed semicircles around her, looking on in puzzled amusement. Her dance included a gag in which she would move around large, fake breasts located under her silver dress (they appeared to be large
inflatable balls) in sync with the rhythms. Homosexuality has only recently become a topic of public debate in Chile, and most often highly educated segments of society dominate this discussion. The fact that a largely poor and lower middle class audience would laugh and applaud for a transvestite underscores the suspension of rules and norms that occurs on the streets outside the markets. This carnival atmosphere, intensified by the large crowds, as well as circus-like attractions such as pantomime artists and the sale and display of live animals, creates a feeling of momentary liberation from everyday routines. In this regard, the Bío Bío markets are distinct from the ferias, where shoppers share humor and enjoyment in one-on-one interactions through which they enact and refer to traditional roles and relationships. The flea market, by contrast, inverts those rules through the unusual attractions it hosts that seem to soften onlookers’ attitudes toward unusual and different experiences (Field notes, 12 July 2003).

**Conclusion**

In this analysis of Santiago’s street and flea markets, we found consumers who have little in common with the isolated, hedonistic and status conscious individuals often identified by some scholarly observers. In contrast to this flat analysis of consumption processes, this research dramatizes the distinctive aspects of public consumption in street and flea markets. Street markets are quintessentially family settings, where the enactment of traditions, friendship, and humor abound. Thus, in important respects, these settings reflect the traditionalist model of consumption outlined by Douglas and Isherwood (1979 [1996]), conform to the view that shopping is primarily family oriented (Miller 1998), and fit within a broadly relational account of consumption (Zelizer, 2005). Nonetheless, these markets also evidence elements of Certeauian resistance that
demonstrate that shoppers are not only carrying out traditional behaviors, roles, and obligations, but behaving instrumentally as well. The family context shapes these creative activities to give them a different hue than they might have in other contexts.

Shopping at flea markets is a high risk, high return strategic game where experience, cunning, and luck all figure in the outcome for shoppers and vendors. In addition to hardnosed and emotionally distant merchant-vendor encounters, the used goods business facilitates role fluidity through which consumers become vendors and vice versa (Sherry 1990b). Astute entrepreneurs prey on the naiveté or misfortune of vendors seeking to liquidate assets, while thieves or fences sell stolen goods. Thus, undergirding the “thrill of the hunt” are biographies of goods acquired as the result of human misfortune. Collectors also hunt for unique goods, seeking to fashion a distinctive identity (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). While the flea market is a playful and festive environment, much of consumers’ ludic experiences occur outside the markets as part of the circus-like events on the street where commonplace norms are temporarily suspended.

Critics might argue that these findings refer to an archaic sector whose share of sales is declining while malls, department stores and big box supermarkets expand. While these new retail forms are indeed more profitable, the more interesting question to ask is whether the dynamics of consumption found in these alternative markets might also be found in modern retail areas. Evidence from other contexts suggests that these dynamics are indeed present. Prus and Dawson (1991) found that Canadian suburban mall shoppers find “the thrill of the hunt” enjoyable, which closely mirrors our examination of Santiago’s used goods market. Additionally, Dimaggio and Louch (1998) argue that used goods shoppers express greater satisfaction when they purchase products
through friends, a finding that sounds remarkably similar to the casero relationship found in the ferias. In my own observations of Santiago, Chile’s shopping malls, I found resale economies and theft/fencing activities operating within these “cathedrals of consumption” (Stillerman, 2006), while Ortiz (1994) sees malls as spaces of sociability.

This chapter’s findings and their broader applications suggest that we need to ground overarching definitions and theories of consumption in the situated practices of consumers in specific sites, which will lead us to the mechanisms undergirding consumption practices. While broad economic and cultural changes do have profound effects on consumption and subjectivity, these shifts occur in the context of existing retail infrastructures, traditions, practices, and patterns of informal resistance. Shoppers undoubtedly pursue pleasure and status, but they also seek adventure and conduct relational work. Additionally, some shoppers chart “errant trajectories” (De Certeau 1984) through the world of commodities. Tracing these trajectories will provide important insights into their contributions to the structuring of everyday life.

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NOTES

1 During June and July 2001, July 2003, and December 2005-January 2006, I conducted 120 hours of ethnographic observation (with two research assistants) in several Santiago, Chile street and flea markets in mixed and low income communities and in meetings of the national street market vendors’ association (ASOF). I also conducted 24 interviews with vendors, consumers, marketing professionals, and scholars. Finally, I collected relevant documentary evidence. All translations by author, pseudonyms appear as first name only, and individuals who wished to be identified appear with first and last name.
