

Clandestine Crossings

THE STORIES

David Spener

Clandestine Crossings: The Stories

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Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Trinity University

San Antonio, Texas U.S.A.

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*Entre tu pueblo y mi pueblo
hay un punto y una raya.
La raya dice "No hay paso,"
y el punto "Vía cerrada."*

Between your people and my people,
there are a dot and a dash.
The dash says, "No Crossing,"
and the dot, "Road Closed."

*Y así entre todos los pueblos
raya y punto, punto y raya.
Con tantas rayas y puntos
el mapa es un telegrama.*

And that's how it is between all the
peoples: Dash and dot, dash and dot.
With so many dashes and dots,
the map is a telegram.

*Caminando por el mundo
se ven ríos y montañas
se ven selvas y desiertos
pero ni puntos ni rayas.*

Walking through this world,
you'll see rivers and mountains.
You'll see jungles and deserts,
but no dots or dashes.

*Porque estas cosas no existen
sino que fueron trazadas
para que mi hambre y la tuya
estén siempre separadas.*

Because these things don't exist,
but instead were drawn
so that my hunger and yours
are forever kept separate.

Verses from "El punto y la raya," by Aníbal Nazca.

Introduction

The nine stories presented in these pages are based on in-depth interviews that I conducted with undocumented Mexican migrants and their coyotes* in the U.S. state of Texas and the Mexican states of Guanajuato, Nuevo León, and San Luis Potosí [see Map 1]. They represent the kinds of “nuts and bolts” accounts of border crossings that I collected from informants between 1998 and 2006 that, in turn, formed the basis for the analysis contained in the book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border*, published by Cornell University Press in 2009.† Each story here relates individual informants’ experiences in considerably more detail than space limitations permitted in that volume.

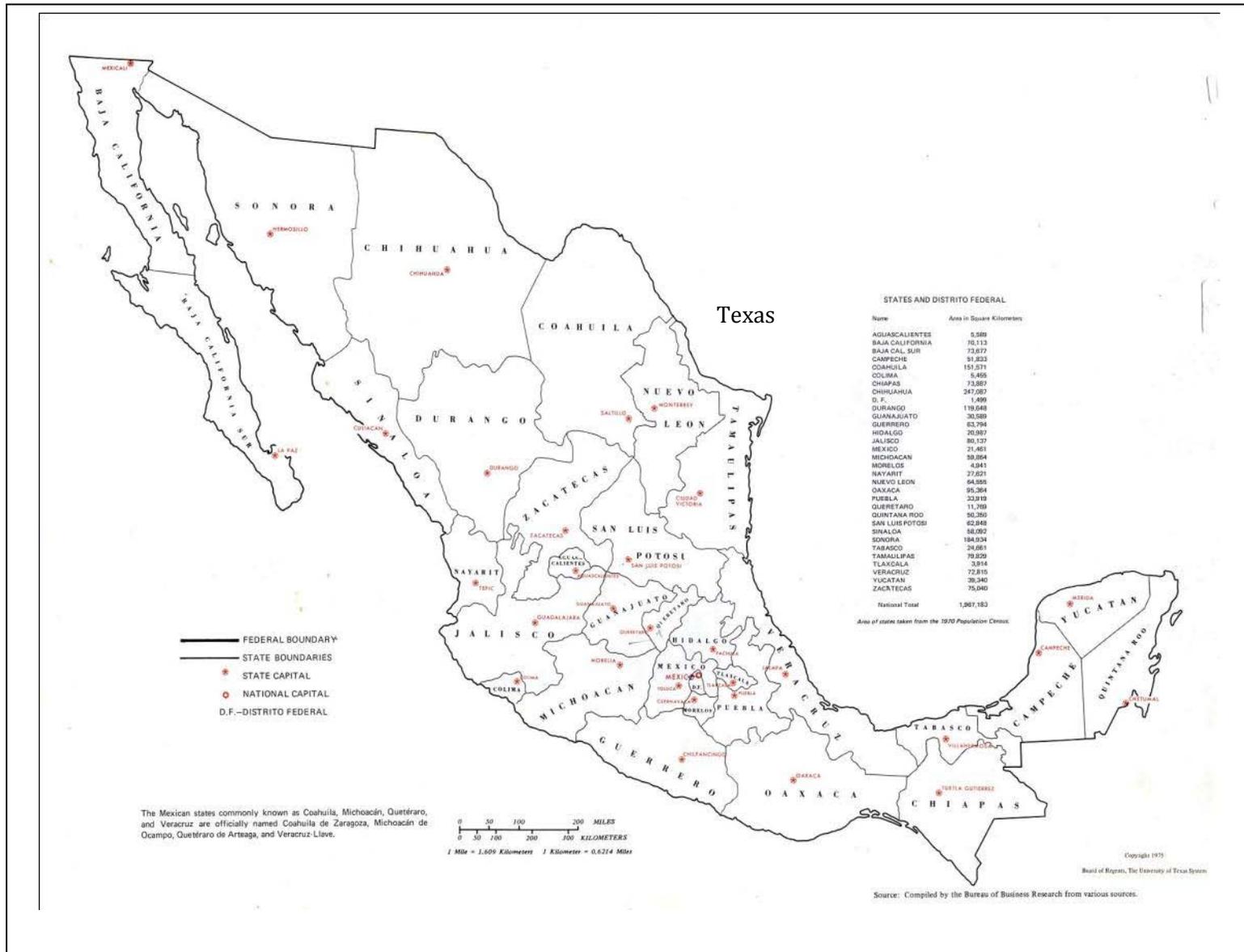
Aside from the intrinsic interest they hold for me personally, I have published these stories electronically for two reasons. First, I want to make them as widely available as possible to researchers, journalists, activists, teachers, students, and others who are interested in gaining deeper knowledge about the ways in which Mexican migrants crossed the border at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the kinds of things that happened to them when they did. Many myths about clandestine border-crossing persist, often fueled by sensational reports in the press. It is my hope that the detailed accounts provided here will promote a more realistic understanding of the process of undocumented migration on the part of contributors to public debates about this pressing social problem. Second, I convinced the scores of people I interviewed to share their stories with me so that English-speakers in the United States could hear about what crossing the border had been like for them and why they had to do it. Thus, retelling their stories in English as they were told to me in Spanish fulfills an important commitment I made to the migrants and coyotes that I met in the field.

I contacted the migrants and coyotes interviewed for my study using a snowball method, working outward from members of my network of friends and acquaintances in Austin and San Antonio, Texas. The informants I contacted in this manner hailed from the Mexican states of

**Coyote* is one of the colloquial terms used by Mexicans to refer to persons that help undocumented migrants enter the United States. For other such colloquialisms, see the “Bilingual Glossary of Migration-Related Terms” on page 215.

†Readers may order the book on-line from the Cornell University Press catalog, http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/cup_detail.taf?ti_id=5488.

Map 1. Mexican States



INTRODUCTION

Coahuila, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz. Several of the people I interviewed in Texas subsequently referred me to friends and family in their hometowns in Mexico, leading me to make trips to interview informants in a variety of towns and cities in Guanajuato, Nuevo León, and San Luis Potosí.

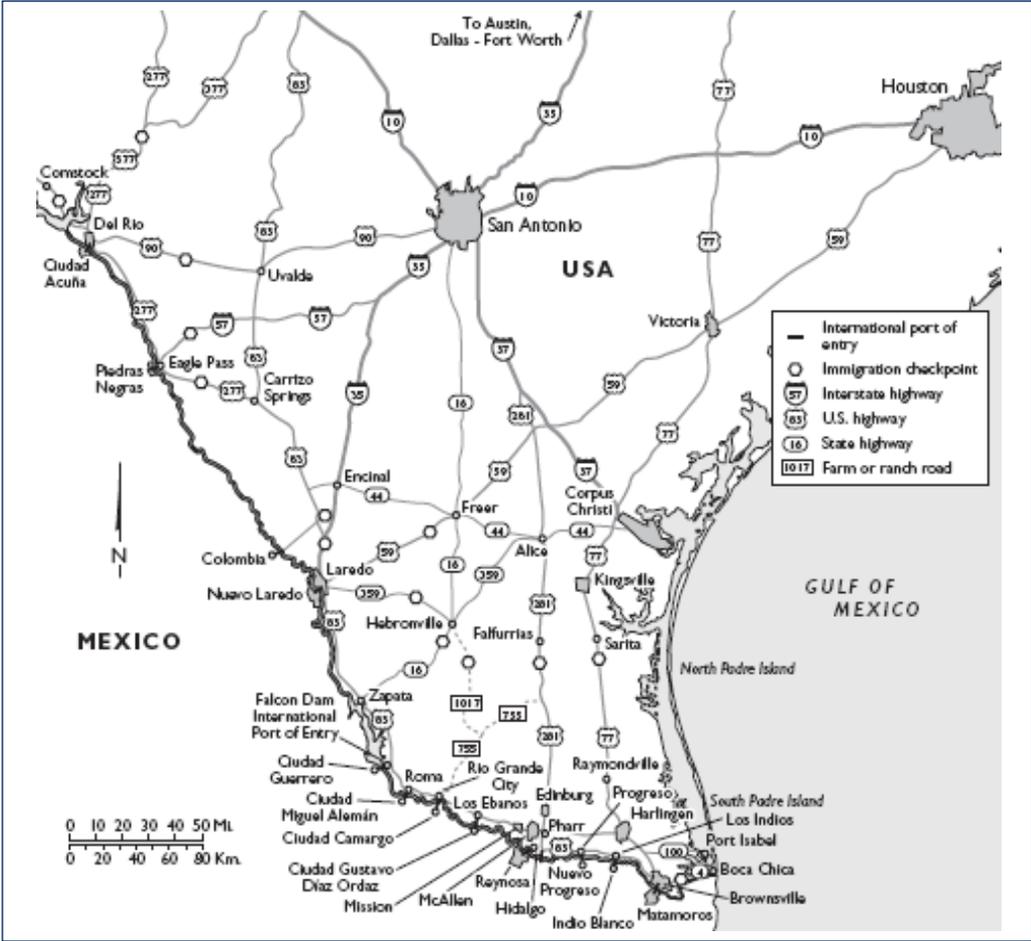
The migrants and coyotes that I interviewed staged the bulk of their crossings of the Mexico-U.S. border into South Texas, across the stretch of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo del Norte running approximately 600 miles from the Amistad Reservoir Dam near the international bridge connecting Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila with Del Rio, Texas to Boca Chica, where the river enters the Gulf of Mexico, a few miles below the twin cities of Matamoros, Tamaulipas and Brownsville, Texas. Because they were bound for points well into the interior of the United States, the main challenge migrants faced was not crossing the river, but moving through the heavily patrolled South Texas brush country undetected, past the final immigration checkpoints staffed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security authorities on the highways leading away from the border [see Map 2]. The vast majority of border crossings described in these pages were made after the 1997 launching of the Border Patrol's Operation Rio Grande, which greatly increased surveillance of the international boundary by U.S. authorities in South Texas, but before the construction of massive walls along many stretches of the border with Northeast Mexico that began in 2008. They also took place before the current wave of violent gun battles involving rival drug trafficking gangs in Mexico that arose after incoming President Felipe Calderón launched a military campaign against organized crime in 2006, leaving 28,000 dead by the time of this writing.

I should also note that the migrants whose stories appear in this collection hailed from non-indigenous, mestizo communities in Mexico that had been sending young men to work in the United States for many decades. In recent years, a growing number of women and children had also entered the migrant stream. Many members of these communities resided more or less permanently north of the border, while many others had returned to Mexico after one or more sojourns in the United State. This meant that members of these communities who wished to emigrate, could frequently count on guidance as well as financial and material assistance from their *paisanos* to make the trip. As a consequence, many of the residents of the communities I visited enjoyed considerable advantages as they migrated north relative to those departing from other communities in Mexico whose migration began much more recently in response to repeated economic crises and civil unrest in the latter years of the twentieth century.

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Thus, these stories should be understood as illustrating only a handful of many different migration streams flowing from Mexico in the contemporary period, each with its own unique characteristics in addition to those it

Map 2. South Texas Border Region



shares with streams emanating from other communities whose members tend to stage their crossings along other stretches of the border with the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Publication of these stories has been made possible by generous financial support of my research and writing from Trinity University and the John D. and Catharine T. MacArthur Foundation. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the many friends, colleagues, and family members without whose advice, assistance, and understanding I would never have been able to complete this work. Finally, I thank the many women and men who took the time to tell me about how they made it across the heavily-guarded border that divides our two nations. I hope one day to be able to walk with them freely back and forth across it, without fear, and in the light of day.

CHAPTER 1

It Was a Lot of Money, But It Was Worth It

Álvaro was from a small town in the foothills of the eastern sierra of the central altiplano region of the state of San Luis Potosí. He went to the United States for the first time in 1999, when he was just sixteen years old. He had gone with some friends from home, crossing the Río Bravo near the two Laredos and hiking through the brush on the Texas side to the small town of Encinal, where they were picked up by friends and driven to San Antonio. Álvaro had worked in San Antonio for about a year before he was turned over to the immigration authorities and deported for having tried to get a Texas driver's license without possessing the proper documentation. He went back to his hometown in Mexico for a month before returning to San Antonio following the same route. This next sojourn lasted for four years, during which he married a U.S. citizen, had a daughter, and learned a skilled construction trade. It ended suddenly when he was picked up by the Border Patrol at the entrance to a construction site where he was working. When I interviewed him for the first time, Álvaro was in the process of negotiating his return to San Antonio with a coyote from a neighboring village. Our second interview took place in San Antonio shortly after he completed his trip with the coyote.

I first interviewed Álvaro Álvarez in 2004, on his twenty-second birthday, in the home of his aunt and uncle in the town of La Carmela, San Luis Potosí.¹ Around a month earlier he had been apprehended by the Border Patrol on his way to work in the Texas city where he was living. At the time of our interview, Álvaro was preparing to travel back to Texas to reunite with his wife and young daughter by contracting the services of a coyote, who lived in a neighboring town. La Carmela was a small settlement located in the foothills of the sierra about an hour's drive from the state capital. It was home to several hundred inhabitants. Its residents raised cattle, sheep, and goats, and cultivated some of the surrounding lands with corn, chilies, beans, tomatoes, and onions. These activities were no longer sufficiently remunerative to support the community, however, and some of its members "commuted" to work in construction, manufacturing, and

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domestic service in the state capital. In addition, some of its residents earned extra cash income from the cottage industry of sculpting *molcajetes* [a Mexican mortar and pestle used for making salsa] from volcanic rock. Men from La Carmela long had migrated to the United States to work, mainly in Texas. By the beginning of the new century, some women had also joined the migrant stream. As a community, La Carmela existed as much in Texas as it did in San Luis Potosí. Many of its migrants had settled permanently in Texas, having legalized their residence in the United States through the amnesty provisions of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. The presence of a Texas diaspora of people from La Carmela facilitated the on-going out-migration of its residents, who typically received assistance in making the trip and finding a job from friends and relatives across the border. As the telling of his migratory history makes clear, Álvaro's experiences were exemplary in this regard.

Álvaro was born in La Carmela, as were his parents, who were *campesinos*. He was the youngest of four brothers, three of whom had migrated to live and work in Texas on at least one occasion. He had attended *primaria* [elementary] and *secundaria* [junior high] school in La Carmela before dropping out and beginning to work in the fields. By the time he was a teenager, it was clear to him that his future, at least as a worker, lay north of the border in Texas. Young men were leaving to make the trip all the time and it was just a matter of time before he went himself. The occasion arose in February 1999, when an uncle invited him to head north with him and three of his cousins. Álvaro was just a few months shy of his seventeenth birthday. By local standards, he was already a man and it was time for him to go.

A FIRST SOJOURN IN TEXAS

The group of men that Álvaro made the trip with included two other local men in addition to his uncle and cousins, making a total of seven travelers. They did not hire a coyote to guide or transport them since several members of the group had made the crossing before and knew the route well. As Álvaro explained, "When you make a trip like this, you usually make it with other people from here, older guys who've already done it before. They give us younger guys a hand. That's how it was in my case." He remembered being scared about making the trip. "I won't lie to you," he told me, "there are lots of risks. And when you go for the first time you're thinking about all kinds of unimaginable things."

Álvaro and his companions would cross the river near Laredo and then hike for several days through the brush on the Texas side, following a high-

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tension power line to the town of Encinal, which lay beyond the final immigration checkpoints on the highways leading away from the border. From there, they would call a friend in San Antonio who would come to pick them up in his car. The friend would then drive them to San Antonio, where they would be received by other friends and relatives who would put them up in their homes for a time and help them find jobs. The men took the bus to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, where they stocked up on provisions for making the trek to Encinal—plastic one-gallon water jugs, tortillas, and cans of beans, corn, and tuna. According to Álvaro, “This was traditional, what was typical for this type of trip.” They would eat all this food cold, since building a fire would likely draw the attention of the Border Patrol and result in their capture.

The group left La Carmela one afternoon and took the bus to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, where they arrived the next morning. After buying some jugs of water, they headed straight to the riverbank. Álvaro was relieved that they didn’t run into any police, soldiers, or bandits along the river. Other men from La Carmela had been extorted, assaulted, and robbed there in the past. They waded across the river in broad daylight in a shallow spot they knew, where the water only came up to their knees. Once across, they immediately began their hike through the dense *monte* [brush] of Webb County, following the *postería* [row of power lines mounted on high posts] that would guide them to Encinal, about forty miles away. It was rough going in the thorn and snake infested brush. “You don’t know what you’re going to find or what might happen to you,” Álvaro said.² He and his friends were especially worried about getting shot at by ranchers whose property they were crossing. They’d heard a lot of rumors about that happening to migrants in the brush, although none of them had any direct experience of this. There were lots of little paths [*brechas*] that wound around in the brush. The easiest thing would be to walk in the right of way of the *postería*, which was cleared by the power company, but that was too risky because it was out in the open and the Border Patrol could easily spot them. They saw a few other small groups of migrants on the trail, including a couple that seemed to be led by coyotes. They didn’t interact with these other groups, preferring to keep their distance. Although they didn’t see any evidence of people moving drugs along that route, they had heard that the *narcos* also used it on occasion, so it was best to be cautious with others on the trail.

On their first day of walking, the men stumbled across a chilling scene. There, along the trail, was the body of a man, under a mesquite tree and covered with flies. He was fully clothed, but his body was badly

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decomposed. A noose hung from a branch of the tree, leading them to wonder if the man had committed suicide after having gotten lost or injured, or maybe been murdered, perhaps by his coyotes.

Sometimes the coyotes do that. I haven't seen it myself, of course, but I've heard rumors that the coyotes will kill people. Sometimes to rob them and other times to prevent people from identifying them that they've abandoned on the trail. I've heard that.

Regardless of how this man met his tragic end, finding him greatly saddened Álvaro and his companions. They left the body where they found it, *en paz* [in peace], after covering it up with a little dirt. Not surprisingly, finding the dead man on the trail made a deep impression on the 16-year-old Álvaro:

We continued on our way, but it wasn't the same after that. All I could think of was that it could have happened to us. . . . It really scared me and made me sad, too, at the same time, since it could have been me. And that was an experience I'll never forget. And this makes you think about all the people that cross the border, day after day, day after day. People cross, people die along the way. Many make it to their destination and many do not. And these are things that make you sad, but you just have to do them.

Although the men did not see any Border Patrol agents or vehicles on the ground while they were in the monte, on the second day one of the immigration service's *avionetas* [light planes] spotted them and swooped low overhead. Everyone scattered and hid in the brush to avoid capture by agents on the ground that they assumed would quickly be dispatched to the area. They stayed hidden for a long time and when they finally emerged from their hiding places and re-grouped, two of their members were missing. They would not reunite with the two men until they reached San Antonio several days later. The feared arrival of agents on the ground never materialized and Álvaro and his remaining companions continued their march towards Encinal. Their food and water both ran out before they made it there on the third day of walking. As was common practice, they had re-filled their jugs with water they found in cattle troughs fed by wells connected to *papalotes* [windmills] scattered among the ranches along the trail. The water was impure and brackish [*salada*], and gave them diarrhea within a few hours after drinking it. When they got to Encinal, they had no food or money with them. In addition, the two companions that got separated from them were carrying the phone card they would use to call their friends to come pick them up. These two men had arrived first, called San Antonio, and been picked up right away. Álvaro and the other

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men had to wait two full days in the brush at the edge of town before their ride arrived. The friend that came for them picked them up in a regular passenger car and all five of them rode normally in the seats, in plain sight. They passed several Border Patrol and other police vehicles on the highway, but were not pulled over. The driver took them to the home of one of Álvaro's other uncles, who lived in San Antonio.

I had a hard time understanding one of the key arrangements Álvaro and his companions had made with regard to this trip. The "friends" that came to pick them up with their cars in Encinal expected to be paid quite handsomely for this "favor." The friend that came for Álvaro and his four remaining companions would receive six hundred dollars from each of them once they started working and could get the money together. In other words, he would receive a total of \$3,000 for driving a less than four hours to and from Encinal. When I asked Álvaro if this "friend" wasn't really more like a "friendly coyote," since they were paying him so much, he insisted that the man was not known to them as a coyote, but just as a friend:

Spener: These guys that pick you up, are they *amigos* or are they more like *coyotes ocasionales* [part-time coyotes]?

Álvaro: *Amigos. Amigos.*

Spener: But they're still charging you?

Álvaro: Right, they charge us. You have to remember that they are taking a big risk. It's dangerous for them because they could get arrested transporting undocumented people and get sent to prison. So that's the danger they face and that's why they charge.³

Álvaro's first sojourn in San Antonio lasted about a year. He lived with his older brother, who had already been living there for a while, and some other, more distant relatives from La Carmela, who had their papers. He quickly found a job as an assistant "cement man" with an Anglo construction contractor, who paid him six dollars an hour, in cash, with no taxes deducted (and no benefits paid, either). The contractor dedicated himself to the construction of new residential subdivisions on the affluent north side of the city and Álvaro worked cementing the outside walls of the houses and apartments they were building. About three months after he started work, there was a *redada* [immigration raid] on one of the construction sites where he was working, but he avoided apprehension when the agents conducting the raid were not allowed into the area where he was cementing walls because they were not wearing hard hats. On two

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other occasions the vehicle in which he was traveling to a worksite was stopped by Border Patrol agents. Fortunately, his U.S. citizen cousin was driving, and Álvaro, who by then spoke some English, had not been asked to show any papers to the agents.

Álvaro's first stay in the United States came to an unexpected end on January 4, 2000 at the Driver License Division of the Texas Department of Public Safety. After nearly a year living in San Antonio, he decided it was time to apply for a driver's license. Unbeknownst to him, the Texas government had recently begun requiring applicants to show proof of legal residence in the United States, which he was unable to do. The bureaucrat who took his application called immigration and he was apprehended and sent back to Mexico that very same day. He wasn't even allowed to go home to collect any of his things before he was put on a bus to Laredo to be expeditiously marched across the international bridge. Fortunately, he was not formally deported, but only "voluntarily returned" to Mexico, which meant he would not be committing a felony if he attempted to return to the United States clandestinely, something that he planned to do as soon as he could. It could have been worse. His older brother was subsequently apprehended in another *redada* and had a federal judge, for reasons no one understood, throw the book at him, sentencing him to six months in jail for having entered the United States illegally, after which he was formally deported.⁴

Although Álvaro's first experience living and working in the United States ended earlier than he had intended, it had been a successful sojourn overall. He had been able to work a lot, make enough money to support himself, and have some left over to send home to his parents. He had immediate and extended family members in San Antonio to serve as a community and provide the support that a young man living away from home for the first time needed. And perhaps most significantly, he had met the woman who later would become his wife and the mother of his child. Better still, she was the daughter of a man from La Carmela.

THE SECOND SOJOURN: MAKING A LIFE FOR HIMSELF IN SAN ANTONIO

Álvaro only spent a month in La Carmela before heading back to San Antonio. He wanted to get back to work and also wanted to get back to see his new girlfriend, Teresita. His method of travel was the same as on his first trip. He and some friends got together, took a bus to Nuevo Laredo, waded across the river, and followed the *postería* to Encinal. The hike through the brush was just as strenuous as on the first trip, but this time there were no dead bodies on the trail or *avionetas* from the *migra*

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swooping down upon them. The only thing that startled him on the trail on this trip was seeing a very large group of migrants, forty or more people being led through the brush by a couple of coyotes. His second trip was cheaper than the first because this time, instead of having a “friend” pick him up in Encinal and charge him six hundred dollars to be driven to San Antonio, his brother came for him and didn’t charge anything. He got back to San Antonio almost a year to the day after he had arrived for the first time.

Álvaro got a job practically immediately working in the warehouse of a large-scale bakery, earning \$5.25 an hour as an *estoqueador*, a stocker. He was officially on the payroll of this business and was paid by check, with taxes taken out. He was able to work this way by borrowing the papers of a cousin who was about the same age as he and similar in appearance. The pay was poor compared to construction and the work was boring, so he only worked at the bakery for about six months. At that point he went back to work as an assistant cement man for the same contractor for whom he had worked the year before. Eventually, he worked his way from being an assistant cement man to a master cement man. By the end of his second sojourn in San Antonio, four years later, he was earning thirteen dollars an hour. This was a lot more money than he started out making as a 17-year-old assistant, but was not as good as it sounded, since now he was paid by check, with payroll and other taxes deducted. Moreover, he had to get his check cashed at an office run by Asian immigrants [*unos chinos*] that charged him a two percent commission, for it was the only place he could cash his paycheck without having to produce a government-issued I.D.

The other major development during Álvaro’s second sojourn in San Antonio was his budding romance with Teresita. About a year and a half into their relationship, she got pregnant and they got married. Teresita was a U.S. citizen who had grown up in San Antonio but had visited La Carmela with her parents on many occasions. She was a few years older than Álvaro and had two children from a previous marriage. Because she was a U.S. citizen, they began to talk with a lawyer about what they needed to do to get him his papers to live and work legally in the country. Their daughter, Susana, was two years old when Álvaro got picked up again by the *migra*. This time it was a real family crisis, not just an unfortunate aggravation for him. Álvaro was driving a van with two of his cousins as passengers on the way to a construction site. He had not been able to get a driver’s license, but the van was insured and legally registered to Teresita. There had been a car accident near the entrance to the site that involved some workers without papers. The local police had called the Border Patrol, whose agents

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began to stop vehicles approaching the construction site. When they stopped his van, Álvaro tried to explain to them that he was married to a U.S. citizen and that he was trying to get his papers, but that was not enough for them to release him. The agents who arrested him did not allow him to make any phone calls, not even to his family. They told him that he had the right to go before an immigration judge to plead his case, but he would likely be held in detention for a couple of months before he got a hearing. In the face of being held in jail and unable to work or see his family for a lengthy period of time—he thought of his brother Lorenzo who had been jailed for six months before being formally deported—he decided to accept the Border Patrol's offer of immediate, "voluntary" return to Mexico.

When I interviewed him back in La Carmela less than a month later, Álvaro was planning to return to San Antonio any day. He explained to me that he had made his life there and that he had to get back to his family as soon as he could. Although his wife had a job, she could not support herself and her daughter on her meager wages working in a store. Having her move to join him in La Carmela was not an option. There were no steady, decently-paying jobs available locally for either of them. Moreover, her two children from her previous marriage did not speak Spanish and would not be able to go to school there. Finally, the fact that Álvaro's brother Lorenzo was also stuck back in La Carmela created a financial crisis for his parents, who were dependent upon dollar remittances from their sons in the United States to make ends meet. Given the urgency of getting back "home" to San Antonio as soon as possible, Álvaro decided that on this trip he would hire an expensive, but highly-recommended coyote from a neighboring village to take him across the border. I talked with him at some length about how he had come to make this decision as well as his expectations about making the trip with this coyote.

HIRING A COYOTE TO MAKE HIS SECOND TRIP TO TEXAS

In addition to the need to get back to San Antonio soon, Álvaro's main reason for hiring a coyote to make the crossing this time was to avoid the dangers associated with the arduous trek through the South Texas brush country. He could take the old route following the power lines to Espinal, but no one else was available to travel with him at the moment. And given the body he had once found along the trail, he did not want to make the trip alone: "Like I was telling you, there are a lot of dangers on the trail. That's why I'm looking for another way to get across, with people who specialize in it." The big advantage of crossing with the coyote he had hired, he had been told, was that he was not going to have to walk at all:

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Álvaro: I think they're just going to take us across the river on a boat and then they take us in a car or truck the rest of the way.

Spener: So, you won't have to walk at all? But you still have to get around the checkpoint on the highway north of Laredo, don't you?

Álvaro: Right.

Spener: But how do you get through the checkpoint?

Álvaro: I don't know, but they have that part under control somehow [*tienen mucho control ahí*]. You don't have to walk at all.

Spener: That's what they've told you?

Álvaro: They say that we aren't going to have to walk at all. We'll see. It's the first time I'll be going with them.

For the privilege of not having to walk through the brush, Álvaro would have to pay handsomely—two thousand dollars, a great deal more than he would have to pay to have one of his “friends” come to pick him up or even that other coyotes were charging at that time. Fortunately, the coyotes with whom he was making arrangements did not charge their customers until they arrived in their destinations in Texas and he would only have to pay them if he made it to San Antonio. “People around here never pay up front,” he told me. “They always pay when they get there.” I asked him how he would come up with the money at that point:

Well, my family is still there. When I get there, when they see that I'm there, then they'll pay the coyotes for me. ... I'm working on that now, making my contacts up there for the money. ... [The coyotes] get you there, to wherever you're going in the United States, and they call your family members: “Here's such and such a person, do you want to come pick him up now?” They come, drop off the money, and then you can leave. And if they don't bring the money, you don't leave; you're in the hands of the coyotes until the money comes. ... My family is willing. I talked with them yesterday. Everything is all set. In fact, I'm going to call them to tell them what day I'm leaving so they'll know when to expect me. ... And this afternoon I'm going to see the coyote to make the final arrangements.⁵

Álvaro was certain he was going to make it back to San Antonio on this trip and said he had full confidence in this coyote, who came so highly recommended. The man had gotten many people from the area around La

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Carmela safely to the United States and had not cheated or abused them, including women, who faced the special dangers of sexual harassment and rape on their trips across the border. The coyote was in his late thirties or early forties and was “clean,” i.e. he was known not to be a drunkard, a drug addict, or a gangster. Álvaro told me that he wouldn’t travel with any other coyote he had heard about:

Trust is what matters in choosing someone. Many families from here have made it there with him. Lots of people have gone with him. He is honest in his dealings with people [*es legal con las personas*]. He is trusted by many people. There’s a lot of trust because many people recommend him—“I recommend him to you, he’s a good person.” And that’s why people choose him. ... In this case, he is the only person I’d go with. The only one I am completely confident about traveling with. If he couldn’t take me, I’d go alone before I’d hire anyone else. ... There are other coyotes around here, but they’re people who are making the trip themselves. They bring people *con el fin de venir acompañados* [mainly to be accompanied]. But they come walking. They walk.

I asked Álvaro if his coyote was so trustworthy and that people in his area were not being abused by the local coyotes, who was committing all the abuses against migrants that were reported so frequently in the press. His reply was similar to what I heard from migrants in San Luis Potosí and elsewhere—it was the anonymous coyotes at the border that you had to worry about:

Those are cases when you really don’t know who you’re getting involved with, the person you’re going with. Here, in my case, we know the people that are going to take us across. ... It’s the ones at the border that come up to you and say, “Do you want to go to the other side? I’ll take you.” They’re the ones that abuse people. They’re just after money. Because lots of times in Nuevo Laredo, we’ll be in the bus terminal and these people you don’t even know come up to you and say, “Where are you headed? If you want to cross, I’ll take you. I’ll take you for two hundred dollars.” Or whatever. And those are the people you have to watch out for. No one should trust those people. You need to go with someone you know.

On the eve of making his third undocumented sojourn to the United States, Álvaro also had been thinking about the possibilities of legalizing his residency there. He said that he and Teresita had already filed some paperwork to get him started on the road to becoming a legal permanent resident of the United States, facilitated by the fact that she was a U.S. citizen. The lawyer they consulted said he thought that Álvaro should be

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able to *arreglar*, i.e., to get his residency papers. Álvaro was not terribly convinced that he was really ever going to be able to get his papers, however, at least not soon enough to resolve his immediate problems:

They tell me I should be able to get my papers, but I see the situation as complicated. The laws of the United States are changing a lot from one day to the next. And lots of times, they change the laws and it affects us favorably. But in this case, I'm looking at them and I see that they're going against us [*no nos beneficiar*].

Similarly, he didn't expect to benefit from any new guest worker program that the United States government might put together. He seemed to have paid attention to the news about the proposals made by the Bush administration and some members of the U.S. Congress. He thought that only the owners of big businesses would be able to legalize their workers and only if they could prove that only Mexicans could do the work. He didn't think that people like him, who worked for small-scale construction contractors, would ever qualify for such a program. He also knew that, at least for the time being, there would be no general "amnesty" for undocumented Mexicans like him.

At the end of our first interview, I wished Álvaro luck on his upcoming journey. I told him that I would be back in my office in San Antonio in a few days. I gave him my card and told him he should call me after he arrived to tell me how everything had worked out. I never expected to hear from him again. Much to my surprise, about two weeks later, the phone rang in my office and I heard a voice in Spanish say, "*Hola, Profesor. Ya llegué*" [Hi, Professor. I made it]. A week after that, I was sitting in Álvaro's house in San Antonio, tape recorder in hand, hearing about how he had made it back to his family in the United States.

COMING HOME TO TEXAS

Álvaro and Teresita lived with their daughter Susana and Teresita's two older children from her first marriage in a modest house they rented on a quiet residential street in a Mexican, working-class neighborhood on the south side of San Antonio. We met at a gas station nearby and I followed him in my car back to his house. He first explained to me how he had not actually left until a week later than he had planned. He had gone to see the coyote in the neighboring village where he lived the day after we completed our interview in La Carmela. When he got there, the coyote was getting ready to leave with a group that same evening. He asked Álvaro if he

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wanted to come, too, right then. Álvaro did, but he didn't have the money he would need to travel to Laredo:

He asked me if I was eager to go and I told him that yes, I was, that I really wanted to see my family. Then he asked me, "Why don't you come with us now?" And I said, "I can't because I don't have the money I need to get from here to [Nuevo] Laredo." He said, "How much do you need?" I said, "About a hundred dollars, I guess." He took out some bills and he gave them to me. He gave me one-hundred dollars, about a thousand pesos. Then he said, "Go back to your rancho, wash-up, and I'll wait for you at eight tonight at the bus station in San Luis.

As it turned out, Álvaro did not actually leave that night. His family's pick-up truck had broken down, so he couldn't return easily to the coyote's village. In addition, he wanted to have the time to say a proper good-bye to his parents, grandparents, and other family who still lived in La Carmela. He called the coyote and said he'd give him the money back and try to go with him on the next trip. The coyote went to visit Álvaro in La Carmela the following week and took him out for a beer. Álvaro returned the thousand pesos the coyote had given him and the coyote agreed to let him know when he was making his next trip. He came back the next Tuesday to tell Álvaro he would be leading another trip that same Saturday. He asked Álvaro to call him on Friday to let him know if he was going to go with him or not. On Friday the coyote came back again to La Carmela to tell Álvaro everything was set for the following day. Álvaro told him he was ready and met the coyote at his home the next day. He was the only person on the trip from La Carmela, but there were three other young men from nearby *ranchos* that he had seen around before. The five of them left on a bus for Nuevo Laredo at about 9:00 PM on Saturday and arrived at the border about 7:00 the next morning. They went to a "decent" hotel in Nuevo Laredo, which was full of gringo tourists, not other *mojados* like them. They didn't check into the hotel, but instead ate and then waited for the other people who would be making the crossing with them. The coyote paid the bill for their food. One of the questions I had for Álvaro was what made the coyotes willing to lay out money for their customers who had not yet paid them anything:

Spener: How can it be good business for them to lay out so much money?

Álvaro: It's that they trust people, because they're always trying to recruit people who are reliable [*exactos*]. They talk to the people who are going to pay my way ahead of time. They said that I was coming and did they have the money and they said yes

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they did. They talk it out between them ahead of time to make sure everything's set. ... And I'm in on the conversation, too, so they know that it's really my family they're talking with.

Spener: But how do they know that your family really has the money they say they do?

Álvaro: Well, if they couldn't pay for me, they would just bring me back to Mexico, and that's it. They're risking that money. In that case, they lose out.

Spener: Is that what they tell you? What's the deal?

Álvaro: The deal is that they don't want any problems once I get there. They want the money to be there right away when I arrive. But in case my relatives say they can't pay, they'll wait a day or so, no more, for them to come up with the money. And if they can't pay for me, they take me back.

Spener: And the coyotes told you this ahead of time?

Álvaro: Right, they told me that before we left. If I can't pay, they bring me back.

Later that morning, another man came to the hotel with five other people who were going to make the crossing. The other migrants were from Guerrero, Mexico City, and other parts of San Luis Potosí. Like Álvaro, they had been recommended to their coyote by friends and relatives. This coyote was the one who would actually take them across, while the coyote with whom Álvaro had traveled to the border and who had papers would cross the international bridge and rent a hotel room for them in Laredo, Texas. He would be waiting for them at the hotel after they got across the river. The second coyote loaded Álvaro and the other migrants into a van and drove them to a house on a ranch along the river some distance downstream from Laredo, whose owner collaborated with the coyotes, charging them 100 pesos (about ten dollars) for each migrant they brought across his land. When they got to the riverbank, Álvaro's group met several other groups of three or four migrants, each with their own *coyotillo*. The coyotes all seemed to know one another but work independently. At the river, these coyotes paid several *pateros*⁶ to take their group across the river. While the *pateros* inflated some inner tubes [*cámaras de llanta*], Álvaro and the other migrants in his group of ten stripped to their underwear and waited in the bushes along the river bank for the order to cross.

The *pateros* had several scouts using binoculars to observe the

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movements of Border Patrol agents on the opposite riverbank. The scouts and the pateros communicated with one another via radio. At about one in the afternoon, Álvaro's group got the *luz verde* [green light] from the scouts, who said the coast was clear for them to cross. They jumped into the river on the inner tubes and were pulled across by the pateros, who swam along side them. When they got to the other side, they dressed quickly, clambered up the bank, and ran across a park with a soccer field where many local people were playing and picnicking. Their guide led them to a van that was parked on a street next to the park and the ten of them jumped into it, lying down on the floor on top of one another to keep out of sight, for they had seen a Border Patrol vehicle driving by the park as they ran across. The agent at the wheel probably had been alerted by a sensor or a nearby video tower that the U.S. authorities operated.

The van was parked in the sun and its windows were closed. It was suffocatingly hot inside. A driver was supposed to come to the van to drive them to their hotel shortly after they climbed in but could not approach due to the proximity of the Border Patrol vehicle. The agents from that vehicle had gotten out and had begun to walk around looking for the migrants. They were soon joined by more agents in other vehicles. They did not seem to realize that the migrants were in the van. Twenty or thirty minutes went by. Álvaro was on the floor of the van under several other men and thought he was going to die from the heat and lack of air. Finally a man in a house nearby pointed the Border Patrol agents to the van. Álvaro was relieved to be ordered out: "I was suffocating. The air was running out. They caught us but it was better than suffocating in there." The Border Patrol agents handcuffed the migrants and loaded them up in the *perrera* [literally a dog pound, referring to a "paddy wagon" used to transport prisoners] and drove them to the station. On the way there, Álvaro saw a bank sign that indicated the temperature was 104° F.

At the Border Patrol station, agents interviewed each migrant and entered his or her biometric data into the IDENT database.⁷ The agents asked the migrants who their coyote was, but none identified him, even though the man was arrested with them in the van. Álvaro explained the reasons why no one fingered the coyote:

Álvaro: They took us to their offices there and they asked me who I was coming with. And I told them, "No, I'm not coming with anyone, I'm on my own." ... And nobody else told them either. "No, we're by ourselves, we've come on our own."

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Spener: And nobody said anything because they knew they were going to cross with the same coyotes again or because they were afraid of what would happen to them if they identified him?

Álvaro: Well, no one said anything because we were all satisfied with him and had agreed ahead of time not to say anything. They'd told us, "If they catch you, nobody knows anything. Nothing. Nobody. You're coming by yourselves." And that was the deal we had—we were all coming by ourselves. The other coyote said, "If they send you back, I'll be waiting for you here in Nuevo Laredo in the plaza or there on the bridge. As soon as you arrive, we'll pick you up and we'll try again."

Álvaro and the other migrants had been arrested at about 2:00 PM. By 3:30 PM they were being walked back across the international bridge to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. By 4:00 PM, they were back in the plaza and had hooked up again with their coyotes, who immediately drove them back to the same spot to attempt the crossing again. Álvaro was afraid to do this. Back in 2000 he had been apprehended with false documents and feared that if he were caught that he'd be put in jail like his brother had been. He told the coyote that he would just go back to the bus station with him after they dropped off the other migrants at the river. At the last minute, the coyote was able to convince him to cross again, telling him that, in reality, they would cross a little further downstream this time and that he was sure they would make it.

Álvaro's group was not accompanied by a guide on their second attempt at crossing. They were instructed to run to a house that was under construction at the edge of the monte once they got across the river. A *señora* would come by in a car and she would call the coyotes to come pick them up in their cars. They made it to the construction site without being captured but the coyotes were not able to come pick them up for some reason. The *señora* who came by drove them to her house where they waited for several hours. When the coyotes still did not come for them, the *señora* drove them all back to the construction site to spend the night, save the one woman in the group, who spent the night at her house. Álvaro and the other men were upset that nobody had come to pick them up. They slept on the floor on top of some packing blankets. During the night, another woman drove by but refused to pick them up because she had not yet been paid by their coyotes to do so. Finally late in the afternoon of the next day, someone came to pick them up. This man made sure that he was getting the right people, those who were the customers of two specific coyotes. He had room for five people in his car. Then another car came for

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another two people, then a third car came for two more. Álvaro was one of the last two to leave. He and his companion were driven to another house along the highway. The woman who had originally picked them up by the river the day before showed up at the house and placed a call to Álvaro's coyote from back home in San Luis to find out in which hotel he had reserved a room for them. They drove to the hotel in Laredo, Texas in two cars, four people from his coyote's group and two others from another coyote. They went straight to the room. About a half hour later, Álvaro's coyote from back home arrived to greet them. According to Álvaro, the coyote "had been paying attention to our situation all along, calling to his collaborators to see what was happening with us."

Now that his charges had made it across the river to Laredo, Álvaro's coyote explained the next stage of the trip:

As soon as he arrives he tells us, "You know what? A [tractor-trailer] rig is going to leave tonight. Only one person is going on it." And he pointed at me and said, "You're the one that's going to go. You'll wash up." And then he asks me, "Do you have some clean clothes to put on?" And I told him, "No, I don't have anything with me." So he says, "All right, I'm going to go buy you some clothes." He went and he bought me some clothes and he bought us food. A lot of food. He said, "Eat up." And at about 8:30 he came back with all the food and the clothes and all that. Then I showered and got dressed.

Perhaps the coyote made the effort to give his customers a good meal to make up for the mishaps discomforts they had endured in crossing the river. Regardless of his motivations for feeding them well, he had good tactical reasons for having Álvaro bathed and dressed in new clothes: to avoid detection by the Border Patrol's dogs at the immigration checkpoint they operated along Interstate 35 north of Laredo:

He insisted on it because when they hide me in the truck, the dogs they have there at the checkpoint can smell you if you're dirty and sweaty [*si uno viene mugroso*]. They can smell the dirt and sweat. So he wanted me nice and clean. As clean as possible.

A little later that evening, a young man came by to pick him at the hotel. He drove him in a car a little ways up Interstate 35. They exited the highway and went to someone's house. The rig was parked there and he was instructed to climb into the sleeping compartment of the cab.

A few minutes later, the trucker, who was also Mexican, came out of the house and introduced himself to Álvaro. He explained to Álvaro how they were going to get him through the checkpoint:

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He told me, "You're going to be hidden here under the bed in the sleeping compartment. I'm going to put a piece of sheet metal over you that has holes in it. Then I'm going to fasten it down with screws." I was going to be hidden in like a little cage under the bed, all closed in so no one would see me. And so he puts the piece of metal siding over me, with the holes in it, and he screws it in real tight. And then he tells me, "When we get to the checkpoint, they're going to bang on the metal here. Real hard. And they're going to say, 'Come out, we know you're in there!' That's what they're going to say. But no matter how much they insist, don't answer. Don't say anything. Don't make a sound. You don't do anything unless they unscrew this *tabla* [the piece of sheet metal] and they open it up and see you there." So he closes me up in there lying down. But it was fine because it was air-conditioned and I was actually quite comfortable.

Álvaro did not find it frightening to be closed up in a dark compartment in a stranger's truck. He did find it quite frightening, however, to go through the checkpoint. It went down almost exactly as the trucker told him it would:

They told me to come out. But I didn't answer. I did like the trucker told me: "Don't answer until they see you." I just stayed quiet. Then I heard them tell him, "Okay, everything is fine. You can go now." And when the trucker pulled away from the checkpoint, I said to myself, "All right. We got through the hardest part." We drove on and then about two hours later we stopped again. I could hear someone moving around above me and heard them rustling through things. And then someone banged on the piece of siding again. I kept still. But the password was that I should answer when they said my name. So when he said, "Álvaro, how are you doing in there?" I said, "I'm fine!" And he said, "I'm going to get out now. We're here in San Antonio." And he undid the screws and let me out.

The trucker had already called Álvaro's family and said he was ready to deliver him to them. Once Álvaro was in the cab with him, they called again and set up a place to meet along the road. One of Álvaro's cousins came with the two-thousand dollars, gave it to the trucker, and took him home to Teresita and Susana.

The other migrants at the hotel in Laredo were going to come the same way. Álvaro had left Laredo on Monday night. The others would all make the trip by the end of the week in five different rigs. Álvaro said he thought there were a lot of people involved in this operation, both coyotes and truckers. He had traveled almost exactly a year after nineteen migrants had suffocated in the back of a tractor trailer near Victoria, Texas.⁸ When I told him I was surprised that he and other migrants were still willing to travel in

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tractor-trailer rigs, he had the following to say:

No, but this is different because in this case you're in the cab, inside the cab, not in the trailer. So it's more comfortable. You have air, just like here in this house, cool and fresh. Plenty of air to breathe. You don't suffer. And the trucker, I felt he was trustworthy. He seemed very decent. And that gave me confidence, too.

The worst moment on the trip was not being screwed into the secret compartment in the tractor-trailer rig but rather when he was caught in the parked van with the other migrants on his first attempt to cross. And the only time he doubted his coyote was when he and his companions didn't get picked up right away at the construction site after crossing the river on their second try. According to Álvaro, all the people involved in taking him across the border and to San Antonio were fellow Mexicans. They had treated him fairly well. No one was armed and no one threatened or behaved aggressively towards him: "Everyone along the way, from the time I left the hotel in Nuevo Laredo to the moment I arrived in San Antonio, they were all right. They acted right and treated me well."

Now that he had made it safely to San Antonio, Álvaro felt that his decision to place his trust in the coyote that organized his trip was thoroughly validated. He had nothing but positive things to say about the man from the village near his:

He knew how to get people across. He has never failed. He treats people very well. I have no complaints about him. They only call him "coyote" because he takes people across, but I don't think of him as a coyote, I think of him as *una ayuda* [literally, "a help," i.e., a facilitator] more than anything. He's helping us.

Although Álvaro credited this man with having gotten him to San Antonio safely, he did not believe that he was actually the *jefe* of the network of people that worked with him. Álvaro regarded it as more of an "association" than a vertically-integrated business with a top-down hierarchical structure:

Spener: Is it your impression that this man from the rancho near yours is really the one who heads up this group? Or are they simply people who collaborate with one another?

Álvaro: These are people who just collaborate with one another.

Spener: So, there's no *jefe* [boss]?

Álvaro: No, there's no boss in this business, they're all in it together [*son todos entre todos*]. It's like a group. They all support

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one another. Do you know what I mean? When you work as a group, you know, we all collaborate equally. That's how he works. He just makes a little more than the others because he's the one who brings them together, who brings [the customers] to them. And that's it.

To demonstrate that his coyote was not really in charge of the other people participating in the chain of coyotes that spanned the border, Álvaro offered me the following summary of how he had been handed off from one group of people to another on his trip, with money changing hands at each step along the way:

Álvaro: The organization consists of various people, you know? So you get handed off from one person to another. . . . It's an association, right? So [the first coyote] says [to the next coyote], "You know what, I want you to take these people across the river for me." These people take us across. They take us from the hotel on the Mexican side down to the river. Then, they get paid for us. Then the others who are at the river, they collect money for us, too. Then we get taken to a house [on the Texas side], and they get paid for us, too. And so the money gets divvied up [*se va distribuyendo el dinero*].

Spener: But you don't pay until you arrive [in the destination city in Texas].

Álvaro: No, no, no, I don't pay until I get here [the destination city in Texas].

Spener: They're paying each other off, among themselves.

Álvaro: Right, each one's paying the other. So, if I can't manage to pay for some reason, they lose that money. That's the risk they're taking.⁹

Álvaro believed that the fact that he did not pay any money up front to his coyote gave the man and the others involved an incentive to fulfill their obligations to him. He said other coyotes ask for money up front, but it was a bad idea to pay it:

A lot of coyotes ask for the money up front. And that's when a lot of the tragedies happen on the way. They leave them behind, abandoned, or like I told you before, sometimes they even might kill them so they don't seek retribution against them [*para que no reclamen nada*]. And lots of times the coyotes will sic immigration on them. This happens when they pay the money up front. That's why they do these things. But not in this case. ... A couple of the people I met on this trip had paid their coyote up

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front. They were from Oaxaca. And one of the other coyotes asked them, "You already paid your guy?" And they said, "Yes, we already paid." And this coyote said, "Man, I didn't think there were such ignorant people out there anymore!" That's what the coyote said! That there weren't any people that stupid left anymore. Then he told them to ask us how much we'd paid so far. And we said, "Nothing at all." ... And in Nuevo Laredo there are a lot of false coyotes, that tell you, "I'll take you to San Antonio for two-hundred dollars." And a lot of people pay them, but then all they do is take them down to the river and across just a little ways and then leave them. People would do better to just turn themselves in to immigration without paying! ... And then sometimes the coyotes are in cahoots with the police in Mexico. They take you down to the border and the police arrive and take your money.

Álvaro had not had too much difficulty in getting together the money to pay his coyote. He was lucky to have several family members and a boss who badly wanted him back in San Antonio, who were all employed and earned dollars. Each was willing to lend Álvaro part of the money at no interest and have him pay them back as he was able:

Álvaro: You get the funds together with help from everyone. My boss loaned me \$1,100. The other boss, the one that gives work to my boss, loaned me \$500. My brothers-in-law, my wife's brothers, too, one \$280 and the other \$200. We got the money together.

Spener: Remind, me: Your bosses are Mexicans, too, right?

Álvaro: Right.

Spener: So no Anglo American entered into any of this arrangement?

Álvaro: No, no. But my boss is a cousin of mine, but he was born here [in the United States].

Spener: But he's someone who knows what it's like for a Mexican to have to cross the border.

Álvaro: That's right, he does. That's why he does so much to help us out, because his parents are from the same rancho as me. He is one of my people. And he knows full well everything you suffer coming across and the shape you're in when you arrive. And that's why he helps us out so much, all of us who come here.

Álvaro said that it wouldn't be too hard to pay everybody back. He was earning \$550 per week and would pay each of them off, little by little.

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Nobody was putting any pressure on him about the money. He reminded me that his wife was also earning about \$225 a week at her job, so they wouldn't have to pay all the debt back solely out of his income. He also explained that his brother Lorenzo would be coming with the same coyotes as soon as Álvaro and his other relatives in San Antonio could get the money together.

Álvaro and his friends and family had so much confidence in his coyote that none of the people who would be paying for his trip had any plan ready to implement should he have problems en route and/or failed to arrive as promised. All they had was the coyote's cell phone number to call if he didn't turn up in San Antonio when they expected him. His wife, Teresita, was worried about him on this crossing, but she had gone through this once before the last time he had been picked up by *la migra*. He called her from Nuevo Laredo after getting caught on his first crossing attempt. He didn't know yet whether he would attempt to cross again immediately or go back to La Carmela. He called her again from the hotel in Laredo, Texas. She had been very worried about what had happened to him, but refrained from calling the coyote. Álvaro said she knew it was better to just *aguantarse* [hold on, abide] until she heard from him again. Fortunately, her parents lived only a few blocks away and she was able to stay with them while she was waiting for him to return. In the final analysis, everything worked out and he and his wife were glad that he had chosen to cross with this coyote than make the trek through the brush on his own again, in spite of the fact that it had cost so much:

Álvaro: I think it was the right thing to do because I really didn't want to walk. It's a lot of walking, it's all in the brush, and you never know. All in all, I'd say it was the right decision. This way I come a little better protected than if I were walking. It's still safer than walking. Yes, I would say it was a good investment I made. It was a lot of money, but I'd say it was worth it.

Spener: So, if you were back in your rancho again sometime and people came to ask you, "Hey, I'm thinking about going. How should I do it?" What would your advice be?

Álvaro: My opinion, my advice that I would give them would be that they should look for someone to take them across. My opinion is that they should get someone to take them, like this man that took me. Because it's very dangerous in the *monte*, especially at this time of year. . . . So doing it this way, you pay a bit more, but it's more secure. You don't walk at all.

Much to my amazement, Álvaro insisted that the U.S. immigration

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authorities themselves encouraged migrants to hire coyotes to cross the border rather than make the attempt on their own. He said this based on the posters he had seen exhibited in the Border Patrol's detention centers when he had been apprehended in the past [see Figure 1.1]. Contrary to Álvaro's interpretation, these posters actually warned migrants *against* attempting to cross with a coyote. The surreal conversation that I had with him made me wonder how many other migrants detained by the Border Patrol misunderstood the posters' message in the same way:

Spener: So, your opinion at this time is that people are better off crossing with a coyote.

Álvaro: I think so. But moreover, immigration itself has a poster there that says "Trust a coyote." In other words, how does it say, saying that a coyote is better, that you shouldn't risk it on your own.

Spener: The Border Patrol says that? [incredulous]

Álvaro: Right. They have a poster there that I saw.

Spener: Where? On the Mexican side or the American side?

Álvaro: On the American side.

Spener: And what did it say?

Álvaro: It's there, in Spanish, and it says "It's better to pay a coyote than to cross alone." And there's a cross painted there. People cross on their own and a lot of them don't make it. They die, they drown, and all that. And it's better, recommended, to pay a coyote.

Spener: Well, I've seen those posters, in fact I have a copy of one in my office. It's a photograph of the desert.

Álvaro: Right, of the desert. With a grave and a cross.

Spener: With a cross there and it says "He trusted a coyote."

Álvaro: [repeats] He trusted a coyote!

Spener: And he wound up dead. That's the message, right?

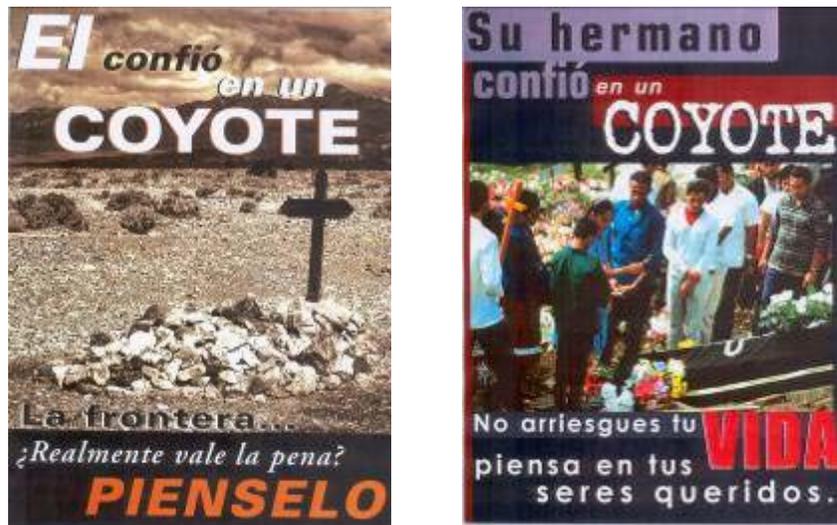
Álvaro: Right. But no, that's not it. They're saying, a coyote is better than going it alone. That's how I understood it. A lot of people come on their own and that is what happens to them. But I didn't understand it very well. I just read it in passing.

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Spener: In the detention center where you were?

Álvaro: Right, but I didn't read it very well. It's just my idea, my interpretation.

Figure 1. Posters displayed in Border Patrol detention cells



Regardless of Álvaro's [mis]interpretation of the posters he had seen in the Border Patrol's detention centers, he was quite adamant that the Mexican and U.S. governments' public relations campaign to dissuade people like him from attempting the crossing were useless. He had seen the public service announcements on television and heard them on the radio. No one he knew, he asserted, paid any attention to them or gave them any credence at all. This was not because people didn't know how dangerous the crossing could be—they did. Rather, it was because migration was one of the only ways they could escape their conditions of poverty in Mexico:

I don't think [the public-service announcements] matter at all. In my case, and I think that everyone feels the same in these cases about those announcements they make, they're worthless. Because our situation is really difficult. You know that you're going to be risking your life. But a lot of the time it's poverty that obliges you to go. It forces us to leave our lands, regardless of

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what we see on television or what they're publishing. A lot of the time it's just irrelevant to you [*sale sobrando para uno*]. I'll tell you again, because of poverty, people are always going to be crossing the border.

BACK IN THE U.S.A.

Álvaro had gone back to work as a master cement man as soon as he returned to San Antonio. He and Teresita needed his salary now more than ever, not only to make ends meet but to repay the debt they had incurred to get him back. Although he was happy to be back and that the arrangements with his coyote had worked out so well, he was still angry about having been arrested and sent back to Mexico. He felt that he had the right to stay in the United States and should have been given the chance to fully explain his situation to immigration officials. He felt that he'd been pressured into agreeing to "voluntary return" and now he was two thousand dollars in the hole. Moreover, with this additional arrest and *de facto* deportation, he thought he had little chance to become a legal U.S. resident in the foreseeable future:

I don't plan to apply for residency now because these apprehensions [*agarradas*] are going to be a problem for me. It would be a long shot and I don't want to get myself into any worse trouble. My big worry is the danger that I could apply and they would deport me to Mexico and ban me from returning. I think I should just give up on it for now and wait until later when my chances might be better. I need to talk with some lawyers to see what they tell me. If they think they can do a good job for me, great, I'll go for it. And if not, I won't.

Although Álvaro was happy and relieved to be reunited with his wife and daughter, getting readjusted to life in the United States, even after being away for only a month or so, was not easy. He was finding it to be very stressful, both in terms of the workload he was carrying and in terms of his worries about having any further run-ins with the law. With regards to work, he felt that in the United States that was all he ever did. The contrast with life in La Carmela was striking and not favorable to life in San Antonio:

You come here just to work. And like they say, you just put in your hours [*uno vive a puras horas*]. Here you're always up against the clock. They pay you by the hour. Here you feel more pressured and more uncomfortable because you're not in your own country. And it feels like a burden.

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In addition to the burden of working all the time, Álvaro was much more worried about being arrested and deported again than he ever had been in the past. It was, he said, a constant concern. Although he himself trusted me and was actually eager to talk with me about his experiences, his wife was not happy that he had invited me to their house. She refused to speak with me and stayed in another room with the door tightly shut the whole time I was there. She said that as a *gringo* they couldn't know for sure that I could be trusted. How did they know I wasn't connected to the authorities somehow? If anything, Álvaro seemed eager to vent his worries with me. Indeed, I suspect he felt freer to express himself without his wife being in the room:

I have to admit I'm much more afraid now. I feel more uneasy [*más incómodo*] because they've arrested me now three times and if they arrest me again, the arrests are piling up and it's going to have an effect on me. I don't feel good about things. I'm uneasy. It's not like it was before they picked me up the last time. Before this last time I felt better since I figured, well, they've only detained me once. I felt more at ease than now. I don't feel too good anymore. I'm afraid to go out or go to work. I'm afraid that they could pick me up again any time, for any reason. Hopefully God won't let it happen again.

One of the biggest risks that Álvaro was running was driving without a license. In a city like San Antonio, with the urban area spread out over large distances and a poor public transportation infrastructure, Álvaro really needed to be able to drive to get to work and take care of other daily needs. Fortunately, the family cars were legally registered and insured in his wife's name, but he was still tempting fate every time he got behind the wheel. This had been true ever since he first came to the United States, but as with everything else, the stakes seemed higher to him now:

I don't have a license. I've always driven like that. The police have stopped me like four times in the past, but they've never given me a ticket or anything. They've always given me a break. And that's how things are now, too, but like I told you, I feel under more pressure now. ... I'm afraid to go out anywhere now. In Mexico, it's freer. You have more freedom. You can even breathe more happily [*respirar más a gusto*]. You say to yourself, "I'm in my own country. Nobody can do anything to me here."

Even before he returned to the United States to under this new set of conditions, Álvaro's attitudes towards the country were ambivalent. He recognized that there were much better economic opportunities for him in Texas than there were in Mexico. In addition, by having started a family there, he really had made a life for himself in San Antonio. At the same time,

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Álvaro said he wanted the people of the United States to know that he and his fellow Mexicans deserved their respect, not their repudiation. At the end of our first interview, as he reflected upon his imminent return to the United States, Álvaro gave me this message to pass on to my readers:

I would just like to ask that they listen to the voice of us Mexicans. Our voice is really silenced in the United States. We don't count as anything. I'd like them to let us Mexicans speak, to listen to our suggestions and our opinions as well, because we don't come to do anyone any harm. We come looking for a better standard of living, to work. To have an easier life, both for ourselves as well as for the people who remain in Mexican territory. If they can hear me through this microphone, I'd just ask that they listen to us. That they take us Mexicans into account. That they don't close the doors on us.

CHAPTER 2

El Carpintero

El Carpintero was a middle-aged migrant who became a coyote after making many clandestine border crossings in the 1980s while traveling back and forth on his own between Houston, Texas and his home in Monterrey, Nuevo León. He had worked in a factory in Monterrey and as a carpenter in Texas. He was arrested by the U.S. Border Patrol near Laredo in 1997 with six undocumented migrants in his car. He spent the next eight months in U.S. federal prison after pleading guilty in court to being an “alien smuggler.” I interviewed him in Monterrey in the summer of 1999, about a year after he had been released from prison and deported back to Mexico.¹

The majority of undocumented Mexican migrants enter the United States for the first time with the assistance of a paid guide known commonly as a coyote. Portrayed by the Border Patrol, human rights organizations and the press as hardened criminals, coyotes seldom get to tell their side of the story. What follows is the tale of one man from Monterrey, El Carpintero [a pseudonym], who entered and subsequently left the smuggling profession.²

El Carpintero started on the coyote's path as a migrant himself. Through his teen years, El Carpintero traveled frequently from Monterrey to south Texas towns, swimming across the river to visit relatives and to work as a carpenter's assistant. He became familiar with the many river crossings and footpaths migrants used to enter the United States without being detected by the authorities. In the early 1980s, El Carpintero swam across the border at Laredo with a friend and a coyote they had met along the riverbank. The three hopped a freight train and got off in San Antonio where the coyote took them to one of the many safe houses located on the city's West Side. He stayed with the coyote in his safe house for several weeks while he worked at odd jobs to earn the money to pay off his \$350 smuggling fee. After finding employment as a carpenter, he worked and lived in San Antonio for the next six years, traveling back to Monterrey several times a year. Among his friends in Monterrey, El Carpintero became known as an experienced border crosser who knew the best routes and precautions to take on the journey. Young men began to approach him for help in crossing and he

EL CARPINTERO

obliged when he was able, though he had not yet begun to charge a fee for his services.

During the deep recession that hit Texas in the late 1980s, El Carpintero returned to Monterrey to work in a factory for several years. As the economy recovered by the early 1990s, he moved back north to Houston to work in construction. As he had done while living in San Antonio, El Carpintero commuted back and forth between Monterrey and his Texas home several times a year. He now knew the routes through south Texas "like the back of his hand" and had become well versed in the "cat-and-mouse game" played by migrants and the Border Patrol. Waiting to cross the Rio Grande at night on one of his trips back to Houston, El Carpintero bumped into an old acquaintance from San Antonio whom he knew to be a coyote. The acquaintance recruited him on the spot to help guide a group of undocumented migrants across the border and past INS highway checkpoints in south Texas. The group's trip went smoothly and upon arrival in Houston, the head of the smuggling ring offered El Carpintero \$100 per head to guide other migrant parties in the future. Though smuggling was never his main occupation, El Carpintero worked on and off as a guide for this family-run ring for the next two years.

El Carpintero disliked working with this professional smuggling ring. It interfered with his construction work, and he felt guilty that members of the ring profited from the predicament of impoverished compatriots who could ill afford to pay the \$500 fee to Houston from the border. He eventually severed his relationship with the ring but did not abandon smuggling altogether. He continued to travel to and from Monterrey four to five times a year and often brought fellow migrants along with him. "I never had to look for them," he explained. "They would always come to me!" He now charged for his services, though he sometimes lowered the price for friends and friends-of-friends. As his reputation as a competent and "honest" coyote spread, strangers also came to him, and he eventually developed a Mexico City clientele in addition to his Monterrey circle.

Although he had been apprehended by the Border Patrol on numerous occasions, El Carpintero had never been charged with alien smuggling even on trips when he was, in fact, guiding groups of migrants for a fee. He noted that it was generally not in the interests of the smuggler's clients to identify him as the group's coyote, since they were depending on him to lead them across the border again if they were apprehended and returned to Mexico. And it was, of course, in the interest of the coyote to lead them again since he and his collaborators would not collect their full fee until the party

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reached its destination. According to El Carpintero, members of the migrant party would typically tell Border Patrol agents that they did not know each other and that there was no guide among them. Alternatively, they might say that there had been a coyote with them but that he had abandoned them in the brush before the Border Patrol arrived--a point worth considering since the Border Patrol frequently denounces coyotes for leaving their charges to face the hazards of the desert alone.

In the face of migrants' unwillingness to identify their smugglers, Border Patrol agents often question those they apprehend quite aggressively, sometimes threatening them with jail if they refuse to identify the coyote among them. It was this type of aggressive interrogation that eventually brought El Carpintero to "justice" one night in February 1997 when he was pulled over on Interstate 35 with a carload of six undocumented migrants. Detained in Laredo, he was appointed a public defender who advised him to plead guilty to the smuggling charge. He agreed and spent the next eight months in jail. Upon release from prison at the end of 1997, he was deported to Mexico. Realizing that if he were apprehended in the United States illegally again he could face years in jail, El Carpintero headed home for Monterrey.

Far from preying upon immigrants, El Carpintero saw himself as providing a valuable service to those needing to find work north of the border. Without him, they might drown in the river, fall prey to bandits, get lost in the desert, or lock themselves inside an unventilated freight car. He acknowledged that there were many rip-off artists in the border towns who posed as professional coyotes and that it was difficult for inexperienced migrants to know whom they could trust. Indeed, he expressed disdain for just such a pair of bandits he had met while serving time in Laredo. One would pose as the coyote, collecting a fee for crossing the river, then lead unsuspecting migrants to the Texas bank of the river, where his accomplice lay in wait, ready to rob them at gunpoint.

The Border Patrol's Operation Rio Grande began in the summer 1997—after El Carpintero had left the smuggler's game. Still, he travels frequently to the border and maintains some contact with people who are in the business there. El Carpintero says that the Border Patrol has made crossing more difficult. Where before it was possible to smuggle a party to Houston with just two or three people working together, now it is best to work with four to six companions. In addition, he says, the prices charged to get to Houston or Dallas have risen, from \$500-700 per person at the time he last crossed, to as much as \$1,000. Clearly, the temptation for experienced

EL CARPINTERO

migrants with an entrepreneurial bent to enter the profession is great, while the demand for coyotes' services, even at the new, higher prices, shows no signs of abating. With the U.S. economy booming and well-paying jobs (by Mexican standards) readily available north of the border, migrants calculate that even \$1,000 is not too much to pay if their coyote can be counted on to get them through the Border Patrol's defenses in one piece. And as they look north across the muddy Río Bravo del Norte, that is a big "if" indeed.

CHAPTER 3

Divided Lives

This is the story of José and María, a young couple living in rural northwestern Guanajuato, not far from the city of Dolores Hidalgo. It illustrates the impacts that intensified border enforcement and the growing criminalization of undocumented migration has had on Mexican migrants and their communities. José and María's experiences are exemplary of those of many other families in the region, although theirs is a particularly dramatic case. Although José never thought of himself as a coyote, the U.S. Department of Justice charged him with being one after a county sheriff's deputy pulled him over as he was driving fellow migrants in a pick-up truck through a small town in South Texas.

José and his wife María lived in Rancho San Nicolás¹ in a municipio in the northern part of Guanajuato state (see Map 3.1). I interviewed them in the spring of 2005 after meeting them more or less by chance. I was working from a base in Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato and was trying to locate some of the *ranchos*² where migrants I had interviewed in Texas had lived before emigrating to the United States. One *guanajuatense* I had interviewed a couple of years earlier in Texas had said he was from a Rancho San Nicolás near Dolores Hidalgo. I had since lost contact with this migrant and was unable to get back in touch with him to get specific directions to his home rancho before leaving for the field. When I arrived in Dolores Hidalgo, I consulted a local map that showed a settlement called San Nicolás located on an unpaved rural road that connected to one of the several paved highways leading away from Dolores. Without knowing if the San Nicolás shown on the map was actually the settlement I was looking for, I drove into the arid and mountainous countryside to find it (see Photo 3.1).

RANCHO SAN NICOLÁS

Late in the day when I reached the area where the map indicated San Nicolás should be, I pulled off onto a gravel road, where I soon passed a young man riding a bicycle in the direction I thought I'd find the rancho (see Photo 3.2). He told me that indeed this was the road to San Nicolás and that it was about 5 miles ahead. Noticing that he had said it was *cinco millas* rather than *cinco kilómetros*, I asked the twenty-something-year-old how long he had lived in the United States before coming back here. He said he

Map 3.1. The state of Guanajuato



had been to work in Texas several times and that most recently he had worked in construction in the Woodbridge, Virginia area. He himself was not from San Nicolás but as we were talking a pick-up drove by, carrying a number of people in the bed of the truck, and leaving us in a cloud of dust as it headed on in the direction of the rancho. The man on the bicycle told me to follow the truck since its driver and the people he was carrying were from San Nicolás and probably were headed home for the night. I thanked the man and followed the truck in my car (see Photo 3.3).

Photo 3.1. The countryside of northwest Guanajuato state



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Photo 3.2. Man riding bicycle on road to Rancho San Nicolás



The road was extremely dusty and rough. It was strewn with rocks and crossed periodically by low-water fords that, fortunately for me in my rented compact car with extremely low clearance, were dry at this time of year. We drove for a time along an irrigation ditch (see 4) that watered some adjacent fields planted with corn and onions that splashed a swath of green amidst an otherwise buff and brown landscape (see Photo 3.5). Several other pick-ups full of people passed us in the opposite direction while still others with higher clearance overtook us and impatiently left us behind in an ever-thickening cloud of dust. Other roads branched off from this one

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Photo 3.3. Neighbors riding in María and José's truck



Photo 3.4. Irrigation canal



Photo 3.5. Irrigated fields near San Nicolás



Photo 3.6. Campesino's home near San Nicolás



and led off to other, unseen settlements where, judging from the traffic, a surprisingly large number of people lived. We passed some scattered adobe and cement block homes here and there along the road (see Photo 3.6) before coming to a ford in the road across the bed of a small stream with a foot or two of water running through it. The pick-up truck I was pursuing continued on and drove across the stream. I followed, wondering if the car I was driving would stall in the water. Luckily, it had barely enough clearance and I made it across. Later, residents of San Nicolás would tell me that there were times during the rainy season when the crossing was impassable and they would be obliged to take a much longer route on a different road to get out to the main highway (see Photo 3.7).

After crossing the river, the rancho of San Nicolás appeared ahead and the pick-up truck began to let its passengers off at one house after another before pulling into a small, fenced compound that contained several

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cement-block houses, some chickens, and loudly barking dogs. I got out of my car and introduced myself to the driver from across the fence. After exchanging some initial pleasantries, the driver told me that this settlement was, in fact, called Rancho San Nicolás. Moreover, the driver, José, and his wife, María, who had been in the passenger seat next to him in the truck, told me that they themselves had lived and worked in Texas and invited me into their home to talk about their experiences.

Photo 3.7. Low water crossing near San Nicolás



Somewhere between 85 and 100 families live in Rancho San Nicolás. The rancho is organized into a number of separate “neighborhoods”, each of which is laid out around family “compounds” consisting of clusters of homes belonging to a single extended family surrounded by wooden or barbed wire fences. Most homes are modest, single-story constructions made of cement block or adobe with tin roofs, although some poorer families live in shacks built with wood boards. The village has a combined nursery school and elementary school and its own small church. It is logistically quite difficult for children in San Nicolás to continue their education past elementary school since to do so they must travel a long distance daily to a larger town and cannot count on a public school bus to pick them up at their homes. The town does not have its own priest; rather, priests from the diocese in Dolores Hidalgo visit to conduct mass and

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perform other religious ceremonies as needed. Some limited irrigation water is available and some of the adjacent fields were planted with corn, onions, and tomatoes. There is not enough irrigated land to go around, however, so that most of the town's residents are obligated to find waged employment to survive. Some men have found work at a local poultry plant caring for hens and collecting and packing their eggs (see Photo 3.8).³ The pay at the plant is poor, however—less than U.S. \$70 per week—and work there is very strenuous. Employees work 10 to 12 hour days with only 20 minutes off for lunch and spend the entire shift on their feet. Only 15 workers are employed at the plant at any given time, caring for thousands of hens. As a consequence of the paucity of productive land and remunerative employment opportunities locally, many male residents of San Nicolás migrate to Mexico City, León, and the United States in search of cash income. The men who migrate to work in the United States go mainly to Texas, the Midwestern, and Southeastern states, crossing the Río Bravo into Texas, rather than crossing through the Sonoran desert into Arizona.

Photo 3.8. Bachoco poultry plant near San Nicolás



A BINATIONAL COUPLE LIVING IN RURAL MEXICO

José and María live in a compound that contains five small houses built by his brothers for his mother and their respective families. All the houses are made of cement block and have indoor plumbing and electricity and cement floors. José and María's home is furnished quite sparsely but is clean and well-kept. Their kitchen features a microwave oven and a modern, gas stove, while their living area is home to a television set, a DVD player, a

CLANDESTINE CROSSINGS: THE STORIES

personal computer, and a cellular phone. They paid for their house with cash earned from jobs they worked in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. One of José's brothers, who lives next door, built the house for them in his spare time, which kept the costs down. The couple also owns two older-model, rather dilapidated pick-up trucks, both purchased in Texas. They supplement their wage income with the small fares they charge for shuttling neighbors between San Nicolás and neighboring towns.

Both José and María are about 30 years old and both were born here in Rancho San Nicolás. They have two young daughters, Cynthia, who is four, and Adriana, who is eight, both of whom were born in the United States. María's parents migrated to the Dallas area in the late 1970s and she lived there from the age of five until the time she moved back to the rancho with José just two years before our first interview. She is a U.S. citizen, speaks English perfectly, and graduated from high school in Texas. Although she and her parents came back to Rancho San Nicolás to visit most years while she was growing up, she and José did not meet until he found work at her father's scrap-metal recycling business in the mid-1990s, when he was on his first sojourn working in the United States as a clandestine migrant. Today, José works in the poultry plant near town. María works as the local preschool teacher and, along with other mothers in the rancho, also cooks and cleans for the school. Last year she had gotten a job working as a bilingual teacher in Dolores Hidalgo, but the pay was not enough to justify the expense of traveling that far from the rancho every day, so she quit.

Even though their home is paid for and furnished rather well by local standards, José and María live hand-to-mouth. They only make enough money to buy a minimum of food and clothing, leaving them no cushion should accident or serious illness befall any member of their family. María is trying to teach their daughters English, but it is not easy. She and José want the children to continue their education after elementary school, but it will be difficult to accomplish if they stay living in San Nicolás. Although they like living in San Nicolás and have many friends and family members in the rancho, their economic situation is precarious and they are worried about both the present and the future. María, especially, has been very stressed-out about their prospects, something she believes has contributed to the two miscarriages she has had since moving back to Mexico. They would return to the Dallas area if they could all go together, but they told me that the problems that José has had with the U.S. authorities as an undocumented immigrant mean that he is barred from even entering the country until at least 2010 (see below for further discussion of their legal predicament). So, for the time being, if the family wants to live together

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without fear of retribution from the U.S. authorities, they will have to do it in Mexico.

After our initial meeting, I returned to visit José and María a couple of weeks later, on a Sunday when José had a day off from working at the poultry plant. That day, the couple took me with a pick-up truck full of neighbors to the top of a neighboring mountain, where hundreds of people from a number of surrounding ranchos were making an annual pilgrimage in honor of the *Santa Cruz*. En route, we passed a long procession of devotees of the *Santa Cruz* walking slowly up the mountain (see Photo 3.9). At the top, we found a festival underway, replete with ice cream stands, games for children, *charros*, and people lining up for free, home-cooked food that was being prepared on an open fire and handed out by a group of churchwomen (see Photo 3.10). Many families clustered under the shade of bushes and trees near the summit, while others sat on the tailgates of their trucks. The leaders of the procession arrived and carried the cross to a small shrine set at the edge of an overlook atop the mountain. José and María explained that this was a revered site for people from the surrounding countryside and that many migrants came here before embarking on the journey north to receive the blessing of the *Santa Cruz* and would also come upon their safe return to give thanks. After eating, we sat down on the ground under the shade of a cedar tree, I turned on my tape recorder, and they proceeded to tell me the story of their life together as a couple and of José's many travails crossing the border.

Photo 3.9. Procession of the Santa Cruz



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Photo 3.11. Santa Cruz communal meal



JOSÉ'S EARLY YEARS GROWING UP IN MEXICO

José was born in Rancho San Nicolás in 1975. Both his parents had also grown up there and were campesinos. His grandfather had owned some cropland and his father farmed while his mother took care of things at home. José has eight brothers and two sisters. He is the third oldest. His father died when he was seven or eight years old after getting in a fight with another local man and falling into the river and drowning. After that, his mother found work in Mexico City. Eventually the entire family moved to the state of Mexico, to a rancho near the town of Tepozotlán, where the kids worked herding cattle and milking cows, so as to be able to live with their mother while she worked nearby in the Distrito Federal. After a year or two, in the early 1980s, José's oldest brother, who was about sixteen at the time, was invited by some cousins in Rancho San Nicolás to go with them across the border to Texas. He accepted the invitation and found work in Dallas. At that point the rest of the family moved back to the rancho and was able to scrape by relying upon dollars remitted home by the eldest son. José and his other siblings were able to finish elementary school during this time. Then one-by-one he and the other brothers began to head north to join the oldest brother in Dallas, where they found work and also began to send money home to help support their widowed mother and younger siblings. The migration of the younger brothers was made necessary when the oldest brother got married and started his own family, making it impossible for him to continue sending enough money back to Mexico to support his mother and siblings in addition to his wife and own young children.

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José finished elementary school when he was about fifteen years old. He hadn't started school at all until he was eight years old and his progress was slowed further because he had to work taking care of neighbors' cattle to earn money to help support the family. After finishing school, he found construction work in León, Guanajuato [a three hour drive from San Nicolás], going there for sojourns of six or seven months at a time, "camping out" at the construction site where he worked with friends and a brother or two. It was during this time, in the early 1990s, that José, now 16 years old, made his first attempt to go to find work in the United States, at the invitation of an elder brother and two of his uncles. As described below, this first attempt failed. He certainly had ample economic reasons for deciding to migrate to the United States to work. When I asked him about his original decision to migrate, he also noted that the apparent successes of other young men from San Nicolás in the United States had made a big impression on him, inspiring a great deal of envy and curiosity. His description of what influenced his decision echoes that of many other young men who have been interviewed by reporters and scholars:

Well, I think it's your youth that mainly guides you. It's the curiosity to know the United States. I think it's mainly your youth that makes you do it in the first place, just to go and see for yourself. In the second place, you see people coming back with their dollars all the time, with their cowboy hats, they come with things that truthfully you don't have here. Things that you'd like to have, like a bicycle, like a horse you'd like to buy, little things like that, that unfortunately you'd never have enough money to buy. So that's why you make the decision, it's, like, let me go there and see if I can make it since they say so many wonderful things about the United States. That's why I went.

THE FIRST, FAILED ATTEMPT TO GET TO EL NORTE

José's first attempt to migrate to Texas ended in failure. It was 1991, still several years before the dramatic intensification of U.S. border enforcement effort in the Rio Grande Valley had taken place. His older brother and two uncles had already found work in the Dallas area on several previous trips they had made. They knew the routes to follow leading through the South Texas ranch country and didn't feel they needed a coyote to guide them. Besides, no one in the group had any money to pay a coyote, not even enough to cover the coyote's own expenses to get to the border. José's uncles and brother told him it would be rough, though, and that it sometimes took them as long as a week to walk around the highway checkpoints on their way into the Texas interior.

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With their meager funds, the group traveled to the border by train, which was cheaper than taking the bus, from Dolores Hidalgo to San Luis Potosí, then on to Saltillo and Piedras Negras. From Piedras, they made their way upstream to Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila where they waded across a shallow place in the river and headed into Texas. They hiked for three days through the brush before being spotted by a Border Patrol helicopter, then apprehended by agents on the ground and returned to Acuña. José said everyone in their small group was very young, the oldest in his early twenties, and it all still seemed like an adventure to them. It was really kind of fun, he said, and he didn't even remember feeling particularly tired or hungry. In Acuña again they evaluated their situation and decided it was best to return home since they were too short of funds to make a second attempt, which would have meant spending another day or two in a hotel at the border and purchasing more food and water for the trek. With the little money they had left, they purchased tickets to head home on the train.

BACK TO WORK IN MEXICO AND THEN A SECOND TRIP NORTH

José's brother and uncles soon left for the United States again, but he went back to work in construction in León. A year or so later, he found a job working at an Avon cosmetics factory in Mexico City, where he worked for 15 months before getting laid off. It was 1994 and he was now 19 years old. He received a severance package worth about U.S. \$500 and headed back to Guanajuato with the money. Around this time another brother, only a year older, called him from Dallas and told him he should come north to work:

The brother that I was closest to, he's only a year older, he had gone [to Dallas] and he called me to say that it was better up there, that there were dollars to be made. He really encouraged me. And here I was wondering what it was like up there, but feeling like I wouldn't make it. But he insisted and he convinced me to try again. And that's how I decided to go again and that's when he told me to go find this person who would take me.

Having \$500 in his pocket and no clear job prospects at the time also made heading north seem more promising than it had at any point since returning from his first, failed attempt. Moreover, his brother was already in Dallas waiting for him, would help him find a job, was referring him to the coyote that had successfully taken *him* across the border, and stood ready to pay the coyote when José arrived. Given the propitious circumstances, José decided to give it a try.

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Making arrangements with the coyote

José confirmed what other men I interviewed had told me, namely that there was no shortage of coyotes in this part of Guanajuato and that this had not changed in recent years, in spite of the increasing difficulties in crossing the border posed by Operation Rio Grande and other, similar immigration enforcement efforts made by U.S. authorities elsewhere along the border. He said that the majority of men from around there worked in the United States and that everyone knew where to find a coyote that could get him across the border. Moreover, word traveled among the region's men about which coyotes were good and which were not, so that it was possible to avoid coyotes that had a bad reputation.

Around here about 70 percent of the men head for the United States, so word gets around who takes people, who's good at getting them across, so you know who's a coyote. ... Once somebody begins to get people in [the United States], the longer he goes without immigration getting him, he's, shall we say, getting more and more famous. That's the way it was with the guy I crossed with the first time. Things were going great for him, they never caught him.

José added that in the area around San Nicolás, he hadn't heard of any local coyotes over the years that had abandoned migrants on the trail, held them hostage, or extorted them, as is often reported in the news. He and others I interviewed presumed that these "bad" coyotes were based at the border and could not be trusted because they were unknown to people in the towns and ranchos where migrants resided in Mexico. Coyotes in his region got a bad reputation only when they were unable to get people successfully across the border without having to walk for many days under harsh conditions and/or being apprehended repeatedly by the Border Patrol. One of the major reasons for a coyote going out of business was getting prosecuted as an "alien smuggler" in the United States upon being apprehended leading migrants into the country. José said that coyotes in his part of Guanajuato state were generally thought of positively by migrants and their families:

Spener: What opinion do people around here have of the coyotes? You say they're admired for being able to get people across, but are they considered to be good people, bad people, or just normal people?

José: Well normally around here they're considered to be good people because they help you get to the United States and they're seen as helpful to everyone. They see it as a benefit that some poor people will be able to get out of poverty by going to the

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United States. And if there's someone who's going to help you do it, you look at it positively. That's why you don't think of saying that [the coyote] is a bad guy, or something like that, even though he's charging you money. Because when you get there you know that with any luck you're going to make more money than you're paying him.

Spener: So, people around here think of [the coyotes] as being good people?

José: Right, they're people who want to help you, they can help you, because it is a big help because I think that anyone who doesn't know the border runs a lot of risks. He doesn't know the river, he doesn't know the people, he doesn't know the places, the routes. So a person who can guide you like that, I think he's helping you a lot!

Given that U.S. and Mexican officials frequently are quoted in the press about coyotes getting rich by exploiting the desperation of migrants, I asked José if the coyotes he knew around his community were getting rich and he responded that they did not seem to be. On the one hand, he explained that the coyotes he knew did not make that many trips per year and that whatever money they earned they had to share with their collaborators on the U.S. side. So that although a coyote in Guanajuato might make several trips a year taking a group of 10 migrants charging \$1,000 or even \$1,500 per person, that money would be shared between the coyote and at least one and perhaps several other collaborators. In addition, coyotes did not necessarily stay in business for very many seasons, given the risks involved and the potential for lengthy incarceration in the United States if they were apprehended leading groups through the brush on repeated occasions. Indeed, several local coyotes had left the business after serving time in prison in the United States or being warned by the U.S. authorities that they would serve time if they were caught again. On the other hand, José observed that coyotes were *gente pobre* that had no experience managing the money they had the potential to earn so quickly, an observation that other migrants and coyotes I had interviewed elsewhere had also shared with me:

They make a lot of money but they don't have anything to show for it [*no les rinde*]. I think it's because the more money you have, the more you spend on things that don't make any sense. So normally that's what happens to people who [work as coyotes]. They get a bunch of money and they go to the cantina and buy a woman [hire a prostitute]. They don't spend their money wisely.

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So it doesn't matter if they spend years taking people across. Sure, they'll live *better*, but they aren't going to get *rich*. And then one day they'll have to give it up or maybe the day will come when they get locked up. That's the problem they face.

Within this context, José's brother in Dallas told him to look up the coyote that had taken him across the border to see if José could go with him, too. The brother told José to tell the coyote that he would "respond" for José when he got to Dallas, i.e. he would pay the coyote the fee for the trip. The coyote lived in a nearby *rancho* [village] and when José went to visit him they quickly negotiated a deal for José to go with him to Dallas.

So I go to see him. And I tell him, "Hey, you took my brother across a while back, his name is Joaquín." And he said, "Oh, yeah! I remember him!" And I say to him "Well, look, he's inviting me to go up there. He told me that I should check with you to see if you were going to be taking any people and if maybe you could give me a hand." And he tells me, "No problem, come with me. Just give me until next Monday or Tuesday and we'll meet at the bus station in Dolores and take off from there."

As was the case with many of the coyotes working in the region, this man lived locally, rather than at the border or in the United States. José thought he was about 30 years old. When he would complete a trip north, he would come back to his rancho where he owned some land, which he continued to plant with corn and other local crops. Coyotaje was, nevertheless, his main source of income.

Making the trip

It was May or June of 1994. José decided to make the trip with a friend of his from San Nicolás and a friend of that friend. They met with the coyote and his other customers for the trip, who were from other ranchos near San Nicolás. There were a total of about 15 people in the group, all men. José had negotiated a fee of U.S. \$700 for the trip, which would not be paid until the coyote delivered him to his brother in Dallas. He and his friends had to pay their own way to the border and everyone in the group had to pay the coyote a small amount up front to cover his transportation, food, and lodging expenses along the way. José said that although the fee charged had risen considerably since that time, these payment arrangements remain typical.⁴ The group took the bus to Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, where the coyote led them directly to the river after purchasing some food and water to carry with them. Unlike other coyotes based in central Mexico, this one did not appear to José to have any collaborators at the border. They did not stay with anyone he knew in Acuña nor did he arrange to have them taken

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across the river in a boat or using inner-tubes or rafts belonging to a local *patero*.⁵ He knew a shallow spot in the river and they waded across after dark. The rocks were slippery and they did not know how to swim, but the river was shallow enough that they were not afraid. Once across the river, they walked two days and two nights. It was hot, but they were lucky because they ran into thunderstorms along the route, which cooled things down considerably. They didn't see any Border Patrol or other migrants along the way. It was, as José said, *paso libre*. The second night, after passing around the last highway checkpoint on foot, a pick-up truck stopped for them along a road at a spot arranged ahead of time by the coyote. All fifteen people loaded in, some in the bed of the truck and some in the cab, all lying down out of sight. They were driven to a mobile home parked on a ranch not far away where they all bathed and put on clean clothes that they carried with them in their packs.

I asked José if the coyote had told him how long and far they would have to walk to get past the checkpoints. He said the coyote had told him one day and one night, only half the time it actually took. Nevertheless, he wasn't particularly resentful about this deceit:

Normally [the coyote] lies to you a little bit. They don't tell you how many hours you are going to walk. If they're going to walk you two days they'll tell you it'll only be a day and a half, so as not to scare you off. Sometimes you feel deceived by the person who does that, because they tell you you're going to walk, say, three days, and it turns out to be four or five days instead. But anyway, so far nobody has ever abandoned me or anything like that, they just say "it's just up ahead" or "we're almost there." ... Mainly it's just to encourage you and you think to yourself, all right, it'll be soon, we're almost there. It'll just be one more day. Like that.

I also asked José if they had brought along enough water, given that they had spent more time in the brush than he had been told they would and that the weather had been hot. Fortunately, it had rained while they were in the brush walking and that had cooled things off a bit. He said that they had not run out of water, but that, in any event, the coyotes knew where to find water along the trail:

No, we didn't [run out of water]. But then normally the persons I've gone with have the water under control. They know where to get water, where there's a *papalote* [a windmill with a cattle pond or trough attached] or something like that. They say, "You know what, here we're going to walk three hours straight and then we'll hit water again." If we're carrying a bottle of water they say "It'll be three hours if you want to finish it off, then there'll be more." And then from there, a little further ahead,

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another half day or another half-night we'll hit water again. So that's how they handle the water. That's why the coyotes that take people from around here, well you trust them, first because you know them, so that if something happens to us, someone in the family knows who to go to about it. Second, so far none of them has let us down with the water issue. The only thing that's happened is that if there's a drought, well, then, even they suffer, too, right? Since they didn't know there'd been a drought.

The next morning a van came by the trailer home where they had spent the night and everybody loaded in, many lying down in the back so that only six heads could be seen through the windows. They made it successfully to the Dallas area, a few hours' drive up the highway. The coyote and his driver-collaborator, who was a Mexican friend of his, drove the migrants to different points around town, where they were received by friends and relatives who paid the coyote the agreed upon fee. José's brother was waiting for him with the money in hand: "It was no problem. My brother was waiting for me with the amount of money they were asking for. The coyote dropped me off, we said *muchas gracias* and that was it." It had been a successful trip. The coyote and his two collaborators (the driver and the person who owned/rented the mobile home) had gotten all 15 undocumented migrants from Guanajuato to Dallas without incident. No injuries, no encounters with the Border Patrol, no getting lost in the brush, no going hungry or thirsty, no vehicle accidents, nothing. Each migrant had somebody waiting for him at the end of the trip who was able to pay the coyotes. Everyone was happy.

Life and work in Dallas, Texas

José quickly found work in the Dallas area. First, he got a short-term job at a scrap metal recycling plant owned and operated by the man from San Nicolás, now a legal U.S. resident, who would eventually be his father-in-law. Soon after, his *padrino* [godfather], whom he had not seen since he was a young child, helped him get a job at a factory that manufactured road signs. To get that job he had to buy a fake Social Security card and other identification, which he did with the help of his brother. He earned \$5.50 an hour at that job, or about \$220 a week, from which taxes were deducted. This money went a long way, however, as he paid only \$70 per month in rent, sharing an apartment with his brother and three cousins. Later he shared a house with 12 other people that had only one bedroom.

A bunch of us live in a single apartment. It's really uncomfortable for you and, truthfully, you barely scratch by, but it's the only way to be able to save any money, so the money you earn stretches a little further and you can send some money home. You don't

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have the luxury of living in a bigger apartment. You have to live as poorly as possible in order have a little money left over.

Living cheaply, José was able to send his mother as much as \$200 per month, allowing to save a little bit for himself as a “cushion” in case he got picked up by immigration. Because he started working right away and his expenses were minimal, he was able to pay off his \$700 debt to his brother within just two months after his arrival. After José paid him that debt, the brother returned home to Guanajuato, asking José to stay on in his stead. It was becoming the family custom for at least one brother to stay working in the United States to send money home to their mother and younger siblings. José was not especially happy about this. After three months in Dallas, he was ready to go home, too.

When I first arrived, I was really disappointed. The United States wasn't at all what I expected. I didn't expect to see people running all around, being afraid of the immigration authorities, trying to avoid the attention of the police. The men like me that work there hiding in their apartments and little things like that, that I saw, that I began to see. I wasn't used to seeing things like that! And I saw people who basically went to bars and sought refuge playing pool and things like that. ... The people I was living with, the illegal people that come from [Mexico], they have no alternative, since we don't know English, we don't have papers, there are a lot of things we can't do. We're forced to live in the worst part of town. Really, after three months I wanted to go home, but my brother went back right after I got there, the one who had paid for my trip, and told me to stay put so I could support our mother, since if we both went home, there'd be no money for anyone. So I decided to stay however long I had to, so my brother could be at home for a while. When my brother got back [to Dallas], then I was able to go home and we kept on taking turns like that.

In all, José spent 18 months on his first sojourn to the United States. He probably would not have gone back again if it hadn't been for meeting María, the daughter of the owner of the recycling plant where he first found work. It had been love at first sight and she showed him a side of living in the United States that he would not otherwise have seen:

When I met my wife she showed me a different type of life there [in the United States]. She took me to the malls, to Wal-Mart, to see and do different things than the rest of my friends. ... I was already in love with her. So when I got back here [to San Nicolás], I didn't last long. And without thinking twice about it, I went right back [to Dallas]. I told her, though, that I really didn't like the U.S. lifestyle. ... I think that if it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't

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have gone back, at least not as soon. But unfortunately life here in Mexico is hard and you can hardly say you won't go back [to the United States].

José had returned home to San Nicolás in November 1995. Because of his love for María, he headed back north as soon as he could, leaving in February 1996.

THE THIRD TRIP NORTH

José's third trip to the United States would change his life. His passage across the border would go smoothly. On this sojourn north of the border he would be reunited with María and their romantic relationship would solidify. They would move in together, she would get pregnant, and give birth to their first child. They would struggle economically but their love remained strong and they would return to visit San Nicolás as a family, still connected by blood to the rancho, but firmly committed to living in the United States.

Making arrangements with a different coyote

On this trip north, José had to find a different coyote to take him. The man who had led him across the border two years earlier was already booked up by the time José decided to contact him. Other migrants in this part of Guanajuato corroborated José's assessment that in the early months of the year when most migrants wanted to head north, it was sometimes impossible to find an available slot on a good coyote's trip:

What happens is that sometimes there are so many people that the coyotes don't have enough space for you. This happens especially in January, February, and March, even through April, there are a lot of people who want to make a run north. In fact, sometimes the coyotes have to go up there, drop off a group of people, and then come back for another group. So they have to make a bunch of runs because of so many people.

Nevertheless, José was able to locate another good coyote without much trouble through his network of family and friends in the area. If anything, this coyote had a better reputation than the man who had taken him north the last time and, moreover, was better known because he lived nearer to San Nicolás. In fact, José already knew some of the second coyote's brothers and some of José's brothers knew the coyote himself, which bode well for a successful trip.

Advance arrangements for this trip were similar to José's last trip. The coyote agreed to take about 15 migrants from ranches around Dolores Hidalgo. He would charge them U.S. \$800 upon arrival in Dallas, to be paid

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by his customers' friends and relatives there. All they would need pay up front would be the coyote's expenses to get to the border from Dolores, about 2,000 pesos all told. Each migrant in the group would contribute equally to that amount, which would come to less than 200 pesos (under U.S. \$20) per person, which was quite affordable. Of course, the migrants would each have to pay their own expenses to the border as well, meaning they needed to get together between U.S. \$100 and \$200 locally in addition to having someone to pay the remaining \$800 for them upon arrival in Dallas. According to José, the coyotes knew they couldn't charge any more money up front than they did: "Well, they know that you're already struggling to get together the money to pay your own way to the border and setting them up to get paid later, so it's hard to give them more money [up front], so that's why they work that way."

A smooth, safe passage

This crossing went as safely and smoothly as the first. Logistically it was basically the same. The group traveled together by bus to Ciudad Acuña. They crossed the river near the same place he had crossed the last time. They walked for three nights, hiding in the brush during the day. On the third night they arrived at a highway beyond the last immigration checkpoint and were picked up by two vehicles and driven to another mobile home, where they ate, bathed, and changed into clean clothes. The next morning they drove on to Dallas and were taken one-by-one to the addresses where their "respondents" awaited them with the money owed to the coyotes. As before, the coyotes were unarmed, fulfilled their obligations to the migrants, and acted respectfully towards them. In José's opinion, this owed in large measure to the fact that migrants and coyotes were from the same area and knew each other:

They acted right. There wasn't any problem with anything. The coyotes show favoritism to the person who has someone who'll respond for him up there. It's like with my brothers. He's like, "I know your brothers. I know you because I know your brothers and they've got the money and I know they're straight." Because sometimes the coyotes have complained that they take people across and when they get there they run off. They just jump out of the van and take off without ever paying anything at all. So, the coyote is worried about who he's taking just like the one who's going with him worries about him. But in this instance they know us and we know them. So I think there's more trust when they know me and my brothers are responding for me. They told me there was no problem. ... You know, we're not signing any papers or anything, it's just your word. So my brothers told him,

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“You know what? You have to deliver him to us safe and sound and we’ll guarantee you your money.”

Given everything that I had read in the press and heard from U.S. government authorities about the abusive behavior of coyotes towards migrants, I asked José what the coyotes would do if someone couldn’t or wouldn’t pay them at the end of the trip. His response corroborated the testimonies I had received from migrants in other regions, several coyotes I had interviewed, and U.S. federal public defenders that had represented accused “alien smugglers” in court:

Well, there’s not that much they can do about it. What they try to do is when somebody gets rebellious, gets aggressive up there and they don’t want to pay, the only thing they can do is tell them, “Well, I’m going to take you back to Mexico. I’m going to take you and haul you back to Mexico.” But this is just a threat, I believe. The ones I know have never done anything like that. They [just tell them that]to try to get them to keep their word. Because this is a *negocio a palabra* [a deal based on your word]. You say that you’ll pay me so much and, well, I say, okay, I’ll give it to you, but we’re not signing any papers at all, it’s just our word. So they try to make threats like that so that you’ll keep your word. And sometimes, like when my brothers responded for me, they’ll sometimes say, “Well, you have to deliver my brother to me safe and sound and then I’ll guarantee you get your money.”

Starting a new life with María in the United States

José began to work immediately for the sign factory again once he got back to Dallas. Once again, he was able to pay off the debt from the trip within a couple of months. He and María dated throughout the remainder of 1996 and she became pregnant by the end of the year. They moved in together when their daughter was born in June 1997. The birth of their daughter Patricia provoked a radical re-orientation in José’s relationship with the United States. Up until that point, he always thought in terms of how working in the United States would help his family in Mexico and perhaps make for a better future for him in Mexico. Now his *compañera* (they hadn’t gotten married yet) and his daughter were both U.S. citizens with no strong connection to Mexico. He began to realize that he was now working towards building a life for himself north of the border. He still preferred Mexico personally and still felt frightened and unfree in the United States because of his legal status, but he also realized that there was little future for his new family back in Guanajuato.

Life became different for me because after we moved in together, we had to find our own place to live. We had to make our own

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life. I had to forget a little about my family here in the *rancho*. I stopped sending so much money home.

At the same time, José and María felt they needed some distance from her family in Dallas. As he said, “It’s unusual for someone from here to be in a relationship with someone from there. There are usually problems of some kind.”⁶ They moved to a suburb, but couldn’t make ends meet on just José’s salary with María staying at home with the baby. One of María’s sisters and her husband had just bought a house in Dallas and needed help paying the mortgage, so they moved in with them. They lived with her sister and her family for a year. At that point, José began to feel it was important for them to go back to San Nicolás so the rest of his family could meet María:

That’s when I started to tell her, “You know what, my family hasn’t even met you. They don’t know what to think of you and hear bad comments about you. It would be better if we tried to go for a visit, to see how they receive us in my home, on the ranch. And that’s how we managed to come to an agreement to come to see my family so they could get to know her, and to meet our little girl.

María had visited San Nicolás many times as a child and José’s relatives remembered having met her on one of those visits, but she had no memory of them. They returned together by bus at the end of 1998. María was welcomed by José’s family and they were thrilled to meet the couple’s baby daughter Patricia. The couple and their baby stayed in town for a month before having to return north in January 1999. María and the baby took the bus back to Dallas. For José it would be much more difficult to get back “home.”

THE FOURTH TRIP ACROSS THE BORDER AND THIRD SOJOURN IN THE UNITED STATES

Since the last time José had traveled to the United States clandestinely three years earlier, border-crossing conditions had begun to change dramatically. In the summer of 1997, the U.S. Border Patrol launched Operation Rio Grande (ORG), which greatly increased personnel and equipment engaged in surveillance along the international boundary in South Texas. ORG initially focused on the stretch of the river running from its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico to Falcon Dam and was subsequently extended step-wise upstream to include the Border Patrol’s Laredo and Del Río sectors.⁷ Whereas in Fiscal Year 1996, there had been 486, 422, and 390 Border Patrol agents assigned to the McAllen, Laredo, and Del Rio sectors, respectively, by 1999, when José made this trip, the number of agents had risen to 1,166 in McAllen, 685 in Laredo, and 639 agents in Del

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Rio.⁸ Not surprisingly, José had a considerably harder time getting through than he had on his last two trips across the border. He finally made it, but only on his fourth attempt.

The first failed attempt through Ciudad Acuña

To make this trip, José hired a coyote who was one of the collaborators of the coyote who had taken him across in 1996. The payment arrangements, route, group size, and methods were all the same as before. Things went awry, however, when José's coyote and his group arrived at the mobile home where José had laid over on the last trip. When they got there, they found another coyote already there with another group of 15 migrants. Needless to say it was very crowded. When one of the migrants left the trailer to relieve himself out in the brush surrounding the trailer, he was spotted by a Border Patrol agent on foot. The agent radioed other agents, who quickly descended upon the trailer in several vehicles. When two of the coyotes, who had driven with one of the ranch's workers to pick up some fried chicken, returned to the trailer to feed their customers, they found all the migrants sitting on the ground outside guarded by Border Patrol agents. None of the migrants fingered the coyotes, but by this time the Border Patrol had its IDENT computer database in operation. When they checked all the migrants' fingerprints and photographs against this database, they found that one of the three men in the truck returning with the chicken had been apprehended several times in the area with groups of migrants. This man was the only one of the several coyotes apprehended who was jailed and charged with "alien smuggling."

The Border Patrol expeditiously sent José and the rest of the group, including the coyote he had contracted near Rancho San Nicolás, back across the international bridge into Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Given that his family was waiting for him in Dallas, José was anxious to attempt another crossing as soon as possible. The coyote, on the other hand, said there was no sense in trying again immediately. The Border Patrol had discovered the trailer they used as a layover point and the men who were going to pick them up in cars from there were not going to be willing to come back for them again immediately. It would take more time to set things up for another try and the coyote would need to do that from back home in Guanajuato.⁹ Moreover, other members of the group were tired, discouraged, and also wanted to return home before trying again, just as José had decided to do following his first apprehension attempting to cross the border in the early 1990s. One other young man named Juan, from San Felipe, Guanajuato, was also interested in trying again. He told José he had

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crossed successfully before from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas by hiring a coyote at that city's bus terminal. José decided to join the man and accompany him to Nuevo Laredo to try their luck there.

Struggling to get across in Nuevo Laredo

Upon arriving at the bus terminal in Nuevo Laredo, José and Juan were immediately approached by coyotes' recruiters who offered to take them across into Texas. José was mistrustful of crossing with coyotes that had not been recommended to them, but they had little real alternative: "At that time we didn't have [a recommendation for good coyote in Nuevo Laredo]. You have to remember that we were improvising at this point. We were already up there and I really wanted to avoid having to come back here from the border." One recruiter offered to take them across for \$400 each, with each of them paying \$50 up front. They accepted his offer. The recruiter then took them to a run-down house in Nuevo Laredo. More people arrived, little by little, until there were more than 60 migrants waiting to cross. At around midnight the coyotes divided the group in two, with two guides to lead each new group of about 30 migrants. The coyotes piled all 30 members of his group into a large van and drove them out of Nuevo Laredo, some considerable distance up or downstream [he wasn't sure which direction they went]. José was impressed with the level of organization of this gang of coyotes, who communicated with each other with 2-way radios and who seemed to have an arrangement with the authorities on the Mexican side, since the police did not interfere with their not-particularly clandestine operation. Finally, they piled out of the van in the darkness along the river and then had to walk a considerable distance further along the Mexican bank before coming to the place the coyotes had chosen for them to cross.

One of the group's guides jumped into the river and swam across to the other side. It was a cold, January night. The water in this spot was deep and swift. Of the 30 migrants wanting to cross, only a half or dozen were willing to try. Juan was unwilling to make the attempt, but José himself felt he needed to try. He took off his clothes, stuffed them in a plastic bag he had been given by the coyotes, and leapt into the river:

The current was strong and it pulled us downstream. At first we didn't want to try, but the simple fact of seeing my wife up there [in Dallas] with my daughter needing me, well I was desperate. And that was how I got up the courage and I said to myself, "Well, I've got to go for it." The other guy, the guy I was traveling with since we left [Dolores Hidalgo] said, "No, let's get out of here, it's too dangerous." And I told him, "No, I have to do it, you know my

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wife and all. Let's see if we can make it." Then the coyote on this side of the river starts trying to encourage us. It's like, "Come on, this is your opportunity. If we all had crossed, they [the Border Patrol] would probably catch us, but since it's just a few people now, we'll make it!" So, I jumped in.

José was not a good swimmer and was no match for the river's current. He began to get swept downstream. Fortunately, the coyote on the far bank was able to grab his arm while holding onto a tree that had fallen into the river. Otherwise he probably would have drowned. The man pulled him up onto the Texas bank, where José quickly dressed. "You have to cross completely nude," he said. "You don't want to be wearing wet clothes because it chafes too much when you're walking. Wet clothes are simply no use to you."

Once they were all dressed, the group immediately saw a Border Patrol vehicle pass by and they split up into three groups of two migrants each and ran into the brush to hide. It was no use, however. They had probably tripped a sensor in the ground and they were almost immediately apprehended by agents who plunged into the brush after them. José begged the agent who arrested him to let him go:

They stopped us and started questioning us. And I said to [one of the agents], "Come on, give me a chance. My daughter needs me." But you know they don't care if you have a family or not. They're just doing their job, period. At least that's what they say. Anyway, they caught me and sent me back to Mexico again.

Back in Nuevo Laredo, José found Juan once more and they decided to try a different coyote, also unknown to them. She would charge them \$1,000 each to take them to Dallas. They would have to pay half the amount up front. She told them how they would do it:

She said she was going to get us a *patero*. That's what they call the people that only take you right across the river. So she said, "I'm going to get you a *patero*. And once you're on the other side I'm going to put you up in a hotel. And from there a trucker is going to pick you up." ... It was just going to be the two of us. She told us they were going to put us in the sleeping compartment behind the driver's seat [in the cab of the truck, not the trailer].¹⁰

José called María and she drove to Nuevo Laredo with her father and the \$500 to pay the *coyota*.¹¹ The *patero* that the *coyota* contracted for José and Juan was a young man who ferried migrants across the river on inner tubes. They were apprehended by the Border Patrol twice before finally getting across the river and into a taxi on the third try. The *patero* and the *taxista* then delivered them to a motel in Laredo, Texas. The *patero* had been

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persistent and had looked at getting the men across as a personal challenge: "I'm going to get you across somehow. I'm going to get you there! I've never failed. I don't know why we didn't make it this time but we will the next time!" And he kept his promise to them on the third try.

José and Juan spent two days and nights, at their own expense, waiting in the hotel for the trucker to pick them up, but he never came. José concluded that the *coyota* was never able to even line-up a trucker to take them. Finally, they called María and her father, who had stayed in the area, to come to the hotel. Since the only obstacle that remained was the *segunda garita* [the highway checkpoint], they decided to try to take José and his companion to Dallas themselves. They bought a Texas map and came up with a plan: They would drive José and the companion up Interstate 35 and drop them off along the highway. The two men would walk to Encinal, the nearest town past the checkpoint. From there they would call María to come pick them up and drive them on to Dallas.

First, however, they needed to decide what to do about the \$1,000 they had paid the coyota in Nuevo Laredo to take José and Juan to Dallas. María and her father, quite fearlessly, crossed back into Mexico and went to the woman's house to demand she give the money back to them. María said she had to "fight with her all day" to get the money back.

María: We were there all day. She was saying that she didn't have the money any more to give back to us. And I told her, "Well then, I'm going to be here all day until you give me some of that money." And she saw that neither my father nor I were going to leave there. We spent the whole day at her house in Nuevo Laredo.

Spener: Weren't you afraid of the coyotes?

María: No, because it was just the lady there and she was the only person there. That's why I wasn't afraid, plus I was there with my father. Well, I was a little worried about what would happen if some of the other coyotes suddenly showed up there, right, but she was the only one physically there, all alone in her house. She was making calls to see about getting the money back, but I'm telling you we were sitting there, not leaving, like we were on strike. But it was the only way because I could see she didn't have any intention of giving us back that money. But finally, when she realized we weren't going anywhere, she had no choice.

José: I think that she thought that once she had the money it was hers. "It's in my purse, now it's mine!" I don't think she ever

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thought that anyone would ever come and demand their money back. That's the reason why I think we were able to get a little of it back.

María: That's right. I don't think she ever expected that of us. She never expected that my father and I would come back and demand our money.

In the end they were able to recover half their money. Needless to say, their experiences in Nuevo Laredo confirmed for José the negative reputation "border" coyotes had back home in Guanajuato. His impression of both sets of coyotes he dealt with at the border was that they were "bad guys" who were only out for themselves, only interested in money. In their dealings with these coyotes, José and Juan constantly talked about what they would do if they had any problems with them. Fortunately, these coyotes had not been armed and they had not threatened or overtly abused the men in any way. Nor had José and Juan seen any contraband drugs present at any point when they were with the coyotes. José thought that migrants were protected somewhat by the strength of their numbers and the fact that they tended to look out for one another in their dealings with coyotes:

They never really abused us. They had us in a really run-down place, really a mess, garbage strewn all over, and things like that, but no, they never really mistreated us. I think that one thing that makes them hesitate a little is the quantity of people there is. The more people there are the more union there is among the migrants. Let's say if there are more than 20 migrants and there are 3 or 4 [coyotes] that want to mistreat us, then I think that's what keeps them from going so far as to really mistreat us. It's the excessive number of people there are. What they *do* try to do is to always subtly try to get money out of you. That's what I think they're mostly interested in. That's what they do.

Walking from Laredo to Encinal

After María and her father recovered the money from the *coyota* in Nuevo Laredo, they bought José and Juan enough food (tortillas, tuna, saltines) and water for what they thought would be a hike of a day or two to the town of Encinal, around 40 miles north of Laredo on Interstate 35. They drove the two men to the edge of Laredo that night and let them out of the car alongside the road. A high-tension power line ran parallel to the highway and José and Juan decided to follow it at a distance. They found many migrants in the brush walking north parallel to the highway and decided to head further into the brush to reduce their likelihood of getting

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caught by the Border Patrol along that heavily-walked path. This came at a high cost, however, since the further they got from the highway, the denser the brush became. Instead of taking only a day or two to make it to Encinal, it took them three days and nights of bushwhacking through the thorny scrub of Webb County's ranchlands. Their food and water ran out on the second day. When they attempted to approach a cattle pond for water, they had to flee when they accidentally set off a stampede of cattle that nearly trampled them. After three days of walking and sleeping under the stars in the January cold, José and Juan reached the outskirts of Encinal.

By this time María and her father had returned to Dallas, having waited two full days for José and Juan to emerge from the brush. They didn't have a cell phone with them and had no way of knowing whether the men had been picked up by the Border Patrol, had gotten lost or way-laid in the brush, or if something worse had happened. Under the circumstances, they had little recourse but to wait for a call in Dallas. Upon arriving at the edge of the small settlement of Encinal, Juan told José he was afraid to leave the cover of the brush for fear that they would get captured by the Border Patrol again. He was too hungry, thirsty, and exhausted to face that possibility. José replied that he would take his chances in town since he had to get back to Dallas one way or another, that's where his life was. Armed with a phone card his wife had bought for him in Laredo, José walked into town. It was around 1 AM, it was pitch dark, and nothing was open. Fortunately, he found a pay phone outside a little restaurant and called María. Desperate for word from her husband, she and her father immediately left Dallas for Encinal in two cars. José went back into the brush for Juan and the two walked back to the restaurant building, where they found that the door leading from the restroom to the outside was unlocked. They entered the restroom to hide and rest until morning, sleeping on the foul-smelling, urine-soaked floor.

Around dawn José and Juan heard noises inside the restaurant and they knocked on the door to see if they could get served some food and drink. A Mexican American woman answered the door and José explained their situation to her and that they had money to pay for a meal. She agreed to cook them some breakfast and told them not to worry about the money. More importantly, she agreed to allow the men to hide in a back room while they ate and waited for María to pick them up, telling them she'd come for them as soon as someone came in the restaurant looking for them. María and her father arrived in the two vehicles not long after José and Juan finished eating. She gave José the keys to their pick-up and he and Juan hit the road immediately, leaving María and her father to have a cup of coffee in

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the restaurant before heading back to Dallas. Through the pick-up's rear-view mirror, José saw a Border Patrol vehicle pull into the restaurant's parking lot as they took off down the highway, as discreetly as they could. Although they were well-beyond the *segunda garita* located just outside Laredo, it was clear that they were still in a heavily-patrolled area. It was a good thing that María and her father were in a different vehicle and were not driving anywhere close to them. But luck was with them this time: Even though they were passed by several other Border Patrol vehicles on Interstate 35, they were not pulled over, and they made it "home" to Dallas by the early afternoon. It had been a brutally-hard trip. The next trip, just one year later, would be even worse.

Back to life and work in Dallas, Texas

Upon their return to Dallas, José started working again for María's father. His father-in-law's business was going poorly, however, and he couldn't afford to keep José on his payroll. Fortunately, José was able to find work as a carpenter with a firm that specialized in making repairs on buildings for insurance companies. The company was owned by an Anglo and for the first time José found himself working primarily among English-speaking U.S. citizens. He picked up some work-related English from them and learned to get around Dallas driving a car for the first time. He and María struggled economically, though: The \$250 he brought home every week was not enough to support them and pay-off the substantial credit-card debt that he and María had racked-up during their attempt to live on their own apart from their respective families. Fortunately, they were able to live with María's sister and her husband again, who still could use the help making their mortgage payments. This kept down their housing costs, making it possible for them to just barely scrape by.

Increasingly, though, José, María, and their respective families were troubled by the fact that they had not been married by the Catholic Church. Although José's family had given María a good reception on their visit to San Nicolás, her family still did not entirely approve of her relationship with him and questioned the validity of their civil marriage. The birth of their daughter two years earlier fueled everyone's concerns about the propriety of their relationship. Around halfway through 1999, they decided to return to Mexico at the end of the year to get married. It turned out to be a momentous decision.

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JOSÉ'S FIFTH TRIP ACROSS THE BORDER: DISASTER STRIKES

María and José were married by the church in Dolores Hidalgo just before Christmas in 1999. They spent a month or so with José's family in San Nicolás before heading back to Dallas in January 2000. Given all the difficulties they encountered on José's last trip north, they came up what they thought would be a better plan for this return to the United States. This time, they would attempt to enter the United States across the bridge through the legal port of entry in Laredo, driving a truck they had sold to José's brother that was still registered in the United States under María's name. José would use the papers of the brother-in-law of one of María's brothers. This man, who was a U.S.-born Chicano, was about the same age as José and was similar in appearance. The plan did not work. The immigration authorities at the port of entry accused José of impersonating a U.S. citizen, which is a felony under U.S. law punishable by up to five years in prison and a lifetime ban on legal admission to the country. José and María, who had their two-year-old daughter with them, begged for mercy. José described the scene as follows:

We were begging the immigration man to please think about our little girl, because we had our daughter with us. Think about my wife! Give us the chance to just go back. And so they gave us the opportunity to have it count just as an apprehension, like they do normally when they catch us and just send us back [to Mexico].¹² But they seized our truck. So we were really discouraged. She left for Dallas [on the bus] and I came back here to look for a coyote from here, so I wouldn't go through the same thing I did last time [with the coyotes at the border].

A fated crossing

José returned to San Nicolás a newlywed without his wife and daughter, and a failed border-crosser to boot. A neighbor of his in the rancho was a trusted coyote, so it was logical that he go to talk to him about joining his next trip north. As other Guanajuato migrants have described to me, there is no shortage of coyotes in the region to take them north. The difficulty, as described previously, is that during the "peak season" in the first three months of the year, the coyotes may be all booked up. This is because coyotaje there is carried out largely by migrants who, in concert with a small number of collaborators in Texas, have "gone pro." A typical coyotaje enterprise there consists of a man living in a rancho who travels to the border with a group of 5-10 migrants who live in his own or nearby ranchos. At the border, the coyote may take the group to a *patero* on the river, who takes the group across to the Texas side in a launch or using

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inflatable rafts or inner tubes. Or he may know a shallow point in the river where migrants can wade across under normal circumstances. Next, it is the job of the Guanajuato coyote to lead his customers through the Texas brush country to a point beyond the immigrant checkpoints located on every major thoroughfare leading away from the border. At that point, the coyote depends upon a friend or several friends from the Texas destination city to pick him up with his customers and drive them to that city, where the customers will pay the agreed-upon fee upon arrival. The principal factor limiting how many migrants a Guanajuato coyote can take with him on a given trip north is the number of friends with vehicles he is able to count on to pick him up with his customers once they are past the checkpoint. This turned out to be the problem facing José and the coyote he approached in late January 2000:

He was a neighbor of ours. He's not here right now, he's in the United States, but he was a neighbor of ours and I knew him well. ... But he told me that he didn't have anyone who could pick us up over there. Then he asked me if maybe my wife could bring our pick up back to the border and then she could drive back [to Dallas] in a different car, and I could take the other people in the pick-up with me. And I told him, "Well, the truth is that I need to go in a hurry and I'd like it to be cheap, being as I lost that truck and I owe a lot of money. I just got married and it's real tough for me right now." So he says to me, "Well, if you want to go for it just tell me when and we'll go." So I told my wife, "Bring me the pick-up to such and such a place on such and such a day at such and such a time."

It seemed like a good plan. José, his coyote-neighbor, and ten other people would cross the Río Bravo near Ciudad Acuña, where he had crossed several times before. They would walk through the brush to one of the same trailers where he had laid over before. There the coyote's driver and María would meet them with vehicles to drive them on to Dallas. It had worked for the coyotes before on many occasions. And, just as importantly, José and María would avoid paying the \$1,000 that the coyote now charged migrants for his services. Everything went according to plan at first. The twelve men crossed the river and walked to the trailer where they waited to be picked up. The coyote's driver showed up on schedule, but María's truck broke down on the way and she had to stop to have it repaired. José, the coyote, and the remaining migrants waited at the trailer for an extra day. Finally, María arrived with the pick-up, accompanied by one of her brothers in another car. She gave José the keys to the truck and immediately left in the other car with her brother.

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Three of the migrants hid in the bed of the pick-up under a tarp, while one other man and the coyote rode in the cab with José. They drove through one small town without problem, but José got confused about which road to take at an intersection in the second town they came to—other times he had traveled this route he'd been crouched in the back of a truck trying not to be seen. The coyote told him he'd gone the wrong way, that there would be more patrols on this road, but José didn't want to brake or pull over, fearing he would attract unwanted attention to them. They made it out of the second town but, sure enough, they were pulled over by a county sheriff's deputy about 10 minutes later. The deputy claimed that José had been driving erratically, swerving from one lane to another, but this was not true. He simply saw three Mexican men driving an older-model pick-up truck with a tarp over the cargo in the back and decided to stop them to investigate. When the deputy found the other men under the tarp in the back of the truck, he told José, "Well, you belong to immigration now!"

José and his friends begged the deputy not to turn him over to the federal authorities, telling him that José had a wife and daughter waiting for him in Dallas, who needed him, but the deputy would hear none of it. They were all turned over to the Border Patrol. Because he was driving, José was accused of being the coyote. The "real" coyote and the other three men were VR'd back to Acuña. José went to court and was convinced by a public defender to plead guilty to one felony count of "alien-smuggling," in spite of the fact that none of his companions would testify against him in court, since driving a vehicle carrying a "load" of "illegal aliens" was considered to be strong *prima facie* evidence of guilt by judges and juries hearing such cases. As a first-time offender, José was sentenced to 100 days in federal prison. Their pick-up truck was also seized and auctioned off by the authorities. Upon completing his sentence, he faced an immigration judge and was formally deported to Mexico. In spite of the fact that his wife and daughter were U.S. citizens, he would be barred from legally returning to the United States. If caught again on U.S. soil, he would likely face a sentence of several years in federal prison.

No life for them together in Mexico—yet

While José was in prison, María found out she was pregnant again. Things began to fall apart quickly. She couldn't pay her bills. Her family was pressuring her to leave José. Then she had a miscarriage. Her parents announced they were getting divorced. When José was released from prison and deported back across the border, María borrowed a pick-up

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truck from her mother and went to meet him in Nuevo Laredo. From the border, they drove to San Nicolás to contemplate their future as a U.S.-citizen wife of a Mexican undocumented immigrant and convicted felon who were also the parents of a young girl who was a U.S. citizen by birth. As José explained, that future was clouded:

I told her I didn't want to return to the U.S. since I'd been deported. I said, "If you want, let's go to Mexico," but then we said we don't have anything. We don't have a place to live, we don't have a car. But the U.S. government isn't giving us any other choice. ... [Back here in San Nicolás] we began to talk. And she was here in Mexico for a while, and that's how she got to know Mexico better. I think that's when she really became fond of Mexico.

Indeed, when I talked to María separately and with José on several occasions, she explained how she had actually come to prefer living in Mexico to living in the United States and she said it was comforting her to be in her ancestral rancho while her parents' marriage was in the process of dissolving back home. She and José had arrived in April when he was released from prison. The months passed. Their love for each other remained strong, in spite of all the challenges they faced.

Then María realized she was pregnant again. They still had no money and no home of their own in which to live. So, María went back to Dallas to give birth to their second daughter. After she left, José went to work in construction again in León, but the pay there was as poor as it had ever been. The hospital birth of their baby in Dallas cost them a fortune because they had no health insurance. María called José to say she didn't see how they were going to make it. She didn't have enough money to even buy diapers, much less pay rent. They wanted to be together as a family more than anything. By now, both of them preferred to live in Mexico but their economic circumstances were such that they couldn't take care of even their most basic necessities there, at least not yet. According to José, there was really only one conclusion they could reach: "So that's when we decided to look for a good coyote, because if they caught me they were going to lock me up again."

JOSÉ'S FINAL SOJOURN IN THE UNITED STATES

It was December 2001, just a few months after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Data available subsequently would show that the number of Mexicans apprehended by the U.S. authorities as they headed north to the United States dropped precipitously in the year following the attacks. This was not because it was suddenly more difficult to enter the United States in

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any real sense—there was no rapid increase in the number of U.S. agents patrolling the border, for instance—but rather because the U.S. economy slowed dramatically and many Mexicans had their doubts about the advisability of traveling to the United States, just as many U.S. citizens curtailed unnecessary travel for many months after the attacks. José and María felt they had no real alternative but to try to get him back to Dallas so they could be together and he could find work to support his family. Then maybe they could save enough money to move back to San Nicolás, where they could live without the constant fear that José would be stopped by the police for some minor infraction and sent to prison for years for re-entering the United States after being formally deported. They would be taking a tremendous risk in having José come north again, but it was something they had to try.

Crossing with some coyotes from Texas

A friend in Dallas strongly recommended them to some special coyotes that, at least until that moment, had never lost a customer to the immigration authorities. The coyotes were a husband and wife team, he a Chicano and she an Anglo-American U.S. citizen, who lived in a South Texas town. They did not seek customers, instead relying exclusively on people being recommended to them discreetly by those who had traveled with them before. The Dallas friend gave José the coyotes' phone number. José called them and told the husband "I'm so-and-so. You don't know me but I'm so-and-so's friend." The coyote was a bit nervous about taking José, since he'd been out of the business for a while. Nonetheless, he agreed to take José for a fee of U.S. \$1,100, with half paid up front. They agreed to meet at the plaza in Reynosa, Tamaulipas on a certain day at a certain time. José would recognize the man because he would be carrying a red bandana in his hand.

José found the man easily in Reynosa, but the man's appearance made a very bad impression on him at first. His head was shaven and he had some ugly tattoos on his arms. Nonetheless, the coyote was polite and friendly enough. He told José he would find him some good *pateros* to take him across the river. Before they met with the *pateros*, the coyote told José not to carry any money with him because there were bandits along the river who might try to rob him. José already had agreed to pay the coyote U.S. \$550 up front, so he gave him the additional funds he was carrying to hold for him until he reached the U.S. side. The coyote told José to be careful with the *pateros* but that he'd be protecting him: "If you don't show up by such-and-such a time, I'm going to come back over here [to Reynosa] and I'm going to make them tell me where you are." The coyote's confidence

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and forceful manner reassured José somewhat. He would be waiting for the pateros to bring José to a fast-food restaurant near the riverbank on the Texas side.

Sure enough, when José arrived at the riverbank that night with the pateros, bandits emerged from the brush to rob them. They desisted in the attempt, however, when they saw that José was arriving in the company of the pateros, with whom they evidently had some sort of arrangement. As soon as the would-be assailants left, the pateros had José remove his clothes and put them in a plastic bag, as he had done on other occasions. They then took him swimming across the river on an inner tube. Once on the other side, José and one of the pateros quickly dressed and walked through the brush for about 10 minutes. When they emerged from the brush, they could see the fast-food place about 300 meters head, on the other side of a highway where many cars were stopped waiting for a traffic light. The patero told him they would make a run for it, crossing through the cars on the highway as fast as they could. As they approached the edge of the highway, the cars began to move and they saw that a Border Patrol vehicle was approaching in the traffic. They hid in the grass in an embankment along the road and waited for the vehicle to pass, which it did, only about 15 feet from where they were hiding. The agents did not see them and did not stop. "At that moment I realized my luck had changed," José said. The patero and he then ran across the highway and into the restaurant's parking lot, where the coyote was waiting for them in his mini-van. The coyote paid the patero, who left to return to Reynosa. The coyote then went into the restaurant and came back with his wife and their 5-year-old son.

The coyote-family and José drove north up U.S. Highway 281. When they approached the immigration checkpoint at Falfurrias at about 9 PM, they had José hide under a blanket and some suitcases in the back of the mini-van. The coyota, who was Anglo, was driving the vehicle. At the checkpoint a Border Patrol agent asked how many people were traveling with her and if they were all U.S. citizens. The woman answered it was just she and her husband and son and that they were all U.S. citizens. The agent told them "Okay, have a nice trip" and they drove on to Dallas. They got there at about 3 AM and took José straight to María, who paid the remaining \$550. This time he had successfully run the gantlet. José did not mention to me whether the Border Patrol had deployed drug and people-sniffing dogs at this checkpoint the night when he passed through in December 2001. I did not ask him in our interview and he likely did not know, since he was hidden under a blanket at the time. Within a couple of years after the 9-11

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attacks, such “K-9 units” were often deployed at highway immigration checkpoints in South Texas to alert agents to stowaways in vehicles. Although K-9 units are not foolproof (I have interviewed migrants who have gotten through checkpoints where they have been deployed), José’s chances of being detected would have been much greater had they been present the night he passed through Falfurrias.

Working and saving money

María had been working at a church-run daycare facility. When José arrived she was able to help get him a job as a janitor at the same church. He worked there for a month, but then one of María’s brothers offered to help him get a job where he worked, with a commercial construction contractor. The brother-in-law worked as a mechanic for the heavy machinery the company used and taught José how to maintain the equipment. The pair worked together on the same crew. José started out earning \$9.50 an hour which was soon raised to \$11.00. By the time he quit the job, he was earning \$12.50 an hour, but was also working many overtime hours at time-and-a-half. María told me that during this period José worked as many as 80 hours a week. For the first time since they had gotten married, the couple had more than enough money to live on. They paid-off María’s credit cards and reimbursed José’s brother for the truck they had lost to the immigration authorities trying to enter in Laredo the year before. Before they returned to Mexico, José and María went to see an immigration attorney.¹³ They asked the attorney if there was any way they might be able to legalize José’s status in the United States given his arrest and conviction for alien-smuggling. The attorney told them that yes, it might be possible, but that José would have to return to Mexico to apply and that he would not be eligible to re-enter the United States for a few years. So, José told me, “we planned it all out, our house and everything, we did it with the idea of coming here and waiting as long as it took to resolve my situation.”¹⁴ So, they began to save money for their return to Mexico.

Soon they had saved over \$10,000. While José kept working, María returned to San Nicolás with money to buy materials for their house. They paid one of José’s younger brothers who had returned to the rancho during that time to build the house for them. In addition to the obvious advantages of keeping wealth and income “all in the family,” this arrangement was beneficial to both parties since it provided the brother with scarce income and enabled José and María to pay for the construction at a lower price and over time, since the brother lived right next door and worked on the house in his free time. With the house underway and the money still rolling in,

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they also purchased another used pick-up truck with the idea of returning to Mexico with two vehicles, something that would be helpful in the isolated, rural area where they planned to live. Finally, at the end of 2003, they were ready to return. In spite of the fact that José was earning a lot of money now and their luck seemed to have changed, they were both relieved to be leaving the United States. José put it this way: "I couldn't go on living like that. I couldn't leave the house. I couldn't go anywhere because of the stress, because of the fear that they'd snatch me up me again and throw me back in jail."

COMING HOME TO SAN NICOLÁS

Materially, José, María, and their children are better off than many other residents of San Nicolás and neighboring ranches. Their house is well-built and has some modern appliances brought back from the United States or purchased with funds they earned there. María is better-educated than anyone else in town and also speaks fluent English, which in principle could make her an attractive employee to Mexican businesses or government agencies. At the same time, the ban on José's entry into the United States, the lack of local income-generating opportunities, and the depletion of their savings has left them living in very precarious circumstances. If their truck breaks down, they don't have funds to repair it. They have no health or disability insurance, so serious accident or illness could be calamitous. Recently, one of José's aunts required surgery to remove a cancerous stomach tumor and José helped pay for it, borrowing funds from other friends and relatives. So now the couple owes the hospital around U.S. \$2,500, a debt they are unable to pay from income they can earn locally.

Both José and María like living in San Nicolás. She now feels at home here and actually prefers it to Dallas as a place to live and raise her children. She has been accepted by José's family and other members of the community and occupies a respected position in San Nicolás as one of the local teachers. She believes that people in San Nicolás are less materialistic and more family-minded than people she knew in Dallas, including the members of her parents' and siblings' families. In Dallas, she said, people live for their possessions. Parents spend a lot of time away from their children working so they can buy fancy appliances and gadgets, like video games. Here, she says, people are not addicted to such things and have more time to actually spend with each other and their kids. Her own family back in Dallas thinks she is crazy for having moved back to San Nicolás. They see it as backward and primitive and can't imagine how she gets along

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without all the modern conveniences and diversions available in the United States.

On the other hand, José and María worry about their future in Mexico beyond the immediate term. Their two daughters can go to school through sixth grade in San Nicolás, but after that they would have to travel elsewhere to continue their education. This would imply a considerable increase in their family expenses that they cannot afford at their present income. Given her higher level of education and her fluent English, María's earning potential in Mexico is considerably greater than José's, but there are few opportunities beyond her current pre-school teaching locally. Although she could teach school or work for a company, perhaps in the tourist sector in Dolores Hidalgo, San Miguel de Allende, or Guanajuato City, she and José do not have the important social connections to people in those labor markets that would facilitate her getting a job that would pay well enough to offset the considerable transportation expenses she would incur commuting between any of them and San Nicolás.

Because María has never worked elsewhere in Mexico and her network of social relationships is limited almost entirely to San Nicolás and the Dallas area, she has no real "ins" to finding jobs in Mexican cities that would offer pay commensurate to her level of education and English-language ability. One possibility they have considered is having María attend university in Celaya, Guanajuato to get a teaching degree that would permit her to work as a full-fledged teacher at higher pay and, perhaps more importantly, allow her to develop a network of professional contacts that would help her find a job in one of the better schools in the state of Guanajuato. José also has some members of his extended family living in Celaya, who might be able to help him find a job there in construction or in a factory. The biggest challenge facing them with regard to Celaya is housing and their lack of savings: They have a house in San Nicolás but could not sell it or rent it if they wanted to move. Arriving in Celaya, they would have no place to live, no money with which to purchase a home, and not enough income initially to rent a house or an apartment. José, on the other hand, has worked in construction in León, Guanajuato, and has friends from San Nicolás who continue to do so. Unfortunately, the pay is so low that it barely is worthwhile having him commute there from San Nicolás and too low to permit the rest of the family to move to León with him. Indeed, when he and his brothers have worked there in the past, they have always camped-out on the construction site itself rather than rent a place to live.

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In the absence of a more permanent resolution to their need for a steady cash income capable of covering their family's expenses in Mexico, María has begun to make her own periodic sojourns back to the Dallas area not just to visit her family, but also to work for several months at a time. She did this, for example, in July and August of 2005, while her kids were out of school, staying with one of her sisters and working two jobs where she was employed before moving back to Mexico—at the church-run daycare mentioned earlier as well as working at a restaurant where she has worked on-and-off on a part-time basis since high school. She was able to save up a couple of thousand dollars in this way before returning to San Nicolás in time for the new school year to start. When I last visited José and María in San Nicolás in January 2006, María was preparing to leave for Dallas again to spend another three or four months working. This time she would bring only their younger daughter, who is not yet in primary school; the older daughter would stay back with José so her school year would not be interrupted.

In principle, having María make periodic trips to work in Dallas to generate cash for the family when the need arises could represent a solution to the family's predicament. She is, after all, a U.S. citizen and can travel back and forth across the border and work in the United States without restriction. Although she and José would rather not be separated from each other or their children for months at a time, the periodic, months-long absence of a spouse/parent while working in the United States is actually the norm of family life in San Nicolás. Moreover, because María is a U.S. citizen, it is in fact much easier for their family to pursue this strategy than most other families in San Nicolás whose members work in the United States without papers. Indeed, in their own extended family José and María have an example of a couple where one spouse has "papers" to work in the United States and "commutes" to work in Texas while the rest of the family remains living in San Nicolás: José's oldest brother Horacio. The chief difference between the situations of José, María, and their children and Horacio's wife and children is that Horacio is a man. The gendered rules of behavior in this part of rural Mexico are such that however "normal" it is for a man to be away from home for long stretches of time, leaving his wife behind to care for the children while he is earning dollars, it is nearly inconceivable for the father to stay behind to care for the children while the mother works north of the border. Thus, although their family is, in fact, pursuing a gender-bending income-generating strategy, they do not see it as a long-term way of resolving their economic

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predicament, in large measure because it is not a strategy that other members of their respective families and the community support.

ADVICE FOR OTHER MIGRANTS

I asked José the question I ask all the migrants that I interview: “If someone without papers who had decided to go north of the border in search of work came to you for advice about how to do it, what would you tell him?” Like many other interviewees, José said he would tell them to find a coyote to help him that had been recommended by friends who had already crossed successfully with him. In spite of all of his experience, he himself would not attempt to cross alone nor would he recommend trusting a *desconocido* [stranger], whether from around here or at the border. He said there were still plenty of coyotes working in his part of Guanajuato and that you could get reliable information about them just by asking around among people who had been to the United States. In spite of the build-up of U.S. forces at the border, coyotes were still successful in getting his *paisanos* to their destinations on the other side, and he doubted that it would ever stop:

Spener: They keep operating in this area?

José: Yes, I don't think it'll ever stop as long as we migrants keep going north.

Spener: And they keep finding ways to get across?

José: Yes, if it's not one way it's another. People really don't have the option of staying here. I've been through all these things, but there are sadder stories, some stories that are not as sad as mine, too, but I believe that everyone needs to go to the United States for economic reasons. And I think that the best thing is to go with [a coyote] you know and that you rely on him to get you there.

José did note, however, that because the price charged by coyotes had risen substantially in recent years, owing to increased difficulties crossing and the greater threat of lengthy incarceration if they were apprehended and prosecuted in the United States, migrants were finding they had to extend their stays north of the border. Where formerly men would go for sojourns of as little as three or four months at a time, today they had to stay a year or longer in order to clear enough money from working in order to justify the trip. This has become quite a hardship for families living in San Nicolás since it means that fathers, husbands, and working-age sons are seldom home.

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With regard to the on-going availability of coyotes, I asked José why he had never consciously decided to try his hand as a paid guide and transporter.¹⁵ Clearly he had the knowledge and contacts in order to “go professional” if he chose to and could have earned a great deal of money working as a coyote. He explained that the risk was too great and that in order to work as a coyote he would have to involve his wife and children, which he did not feel would be proper. In addition, he believed that coyotes became addicted to a cash income that not only was obtained at great personal risk, but also led them to behave irresponsibly with money and, in some cases, head down the path of dissolution, drinking away the “easy money” they earned and paying insufficient attention to the welfare of their loved ones. María, he said, shared his personal rejection of coyotaje as a career, suggesting to me that they had at least discussed the possibility of his becoming a coyote at some point in the past.

In addition to their own calamitous experiences, José and María regarded the case of a neighbor of theirs who used to work as a coyote as a cautionary tale. The neighbor, Roberto, like many men in San Nicolás and neighboring ranchos, had migrated without papers to the Dallas, Texas area over the course of many years.¹⁶ Like other men, he gained a reputation as knowing the best routes and eventually became a coyote, accompanying groups of migrants from San Nicolás all the way to Dallas, relying upon a handful of collaborators with cars to pick him and his customers up once they had walked around the highway immigration checkpoints in the border region. Roberto was not especially well-liked in San Nicolás: He had always been diffident and unfriendly, was prone to petty jealousies, and had the reputation as being the local “grouch.” His reputation as a coyote was good, however, and many local men had traveled north with him at one time or another.

Roberto’s problems had begun around the year 2000, when he was working for a company that had a fleet of cars and delivery trucks in Dallas. The owner, who was Mexican American, allowed Roberto to use company vehicles on his days off to drive to the Valley to pick up loads of migrants in exchange for a share of the profits. This arrangement worked well for a period of time until Roberto got greedy and started making trips without notifying his boss and without paying him a cut of the profits. On one of these trips, Roberto rolled over one of the company vehicles, totaling it. Fortunately, no one had been killed or seriously injured in the accident. The boss found out about the accident and demanded that Roberto split the cost of replacing the vehicle. Roberto failed to pay the boss, however, who

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then fired him and warned him that he had better avoid Dallas in the future lest he come after him to settle accounts.

At this point Roberto returned to San Nicolás and started working again as a coyote from there, leading migrants to other destinations in Texas. He was apprehended with migrants several times in the brush and was warned by the Border Patrol that they suspected he was a coyote and that eventually he would be prosecuted as one, but he persisted. Eventually, he was prosecuted and imprisoned for several months. While he was working as a coyote, Roberto had a nice truck and wore fancier clothes than his neighbors. Although he was by no means rich, he spent money freely by local standards. He has a wife and young children to support now, as well as an elderly mother who is quite ill. Recently he has had to come to neighbors with his hat in his hand asking for money to get his mother medical treatment. José and María say that Roberto has lost a lot of weight recently and rumor has it he is suffering from untreated diabetes. Everyone in town wonders what will become of him.

JOSÉ AND MARÍA'S MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES

At the end of one of my interviews with them, I asked María and José what message they would like to convey to the people of the United States about the situation facing undocumented Mexicans entering their country. This is a question I asked many of the migrants I interviewed and like most, this couple had a difficult time articulating a response at first: it was not a question anyone had ever asked them before and they were not immediately prepared to answer it. When they did respond, they focused primarily on some immediate, practical matters rather than articulating a broad philosophical or political message. In this sense, their answers were also similar to those given by other migrants I had interviewed. I posed the question first to José, who had this to say:

I'd like to ask the Anglo-Saxon¹⁷ to pay more attention to the people who truly suffer. Not just because this is my situation, but because there are many situations like this. Lots of people that they kick out need to be there [in the United States] because of their families. But it doesn't seem to matter to them [the Anglo-Saxons]. They just say, "You're out of here! Now get!" I think they ought to look into things a little more to see if a person in reality deserves to be in the United States before deciding to kick him out. That would be my point. I feel this way because in my own case, from the time that I entered [the United States], I entered with the dream of working and bettering myself.

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Unfortunately I had this piece of bad luck, but up there in fact I never had problems with the police or anything. I never even caused an accident or anything like that and nevertheless they decided that I had to leave. People should realize that my story is all about the border. It's all about crossing over to give my girls the best that I can. I also think that I would probably still do it so my daughters can study and get ahead in life. ... Sometimes you really have no other alternative. So for me, that's the message that I would give them, to pay more attention to that.

Clearly, José had a difficult time looking beyond the particulars of his own personal predicament. At the same time, he insisted that his situation was like that of many, if not most other migrants: They only go to the United States to work. They stay out of trouble the best they can while they're there. They're only there to provide for their families in the hopes of giving them a brighter future. I heard this basic message in many of the interviews I conducted with migrants.

María's message was interesting in the way that she asked the people of the United States to "fix" a very specific problem that made life exceedingly difficult and even dangerous for undocumented Mexicans living north of the border:

They should give [the Mexican migrants] more opportunities. Like they shouldn't deny them driver's licenses so they can get around, since it is very necessary to have a driver's license. Or some kind of permit, not a permit, but a Social Security card, an I.D. so they can work without problems. More than anything else the driver's license is helpful because we had a lot of problems because of that. At times he needed to drive and when that happens you are always worried that they'll stop him. And then in order to get car insurance you have to have a driver's license and if you don't have the driver's license you don't have insurance.¹⁸ So if you have an accident someday, how are you going to be able to cover that accident? You'll have to pay a lot of money in cash to be able to cover it!

At one level, I must admit that I found the messages of José and María to be disappointing. By asking them for a "message" to the people of the United States, I was fishing for some sort of rhetorical jewel that could capture in a phrase or a few sentences a transcendent moral truth about the experiences of Mexican undocumented migrants and their families in this era of global apartheid. Instead, their messages boiled down to simple and concrete pleas to resolve the everyday problems faced by people like them, who live prosaic lives of quiet desperation, divided by law, bound together in a struggle for survival.

CHAPTER 4

Se batalla mucho

Se batalla mucho relates the migratory experiences of Hilda and Julián, a young married couple from a small village in the rural northwestern section of the state of Guanajuato. Julián was the brother and next-door neighbor of José, whose story “Divided Lives” also appears in this collection. Julián made his first trip to the United States in 1994, at the age of twenty-one, just as he and Hilda were beginning their romance. He went back and forth between Guanajuato and Dallas, Texas for the next couple of years before returning to marry Hilda at the end of 1996. They returned to Dallas together to live and work early in 1997. Although their first border-crossing together went relatively smoothly, when they attempted to return with their baby daughter after a visit home at the beginning of 2000, they suffered tremendously. Hilda and Julián’s second sojourn in Dallas was marked by a series of economic and emotional setbacks that led them to question whether it made sense for them to remain together in Dallas, especially since it was nearly impossible for Hilda to work after having two more children there. Finally, in mid-2003 they decided it would be best for Hilda to return to Guanajuato with their children. Even though it was getting more difficult and dangerous every year, Julián continued to go back and forth across the border to work. Their precarious financial situation left him little alternative.

I first met Hilda in the spring of 2005 in Rancho San Nicolás, her hometown in rural northwest Guanajuato. She lived in a small cement-block house with her three young children on the same plot of land where the families of her husband Julián’s brothers and mother had their houses. I had been introduced to Hilda by her *cuñado* [brother-in-law] José and his wife María, who lived next door. [See Chapter 3 for an account of that couple’s migratory experiences and a description of Rancho San Nicolás.] Hilda’s husband, Julián, José’s brother, was working in Dallas when I first interviewed her.¹ I would not get a chance to talk with him until the following January, after he had returned for the Christmas holidays to see her and their son and two daughters. Both Hilda and Julián had been born in Rancho San Nicolás in 1973 and had been raised there, although Julián had lived for a couple of years as a child near the Distrito Federal in the state of Mexico. Their respective parents were also from Rancho San

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Nicolás and were *campesinos*, growing corn, chiles, and beans and raising some cows and goats.

Hilda's father had gone to work in the United States for a number of years, but that had been a long time ago. Since returning to Mexico, he had worked selling *paletas* [popsicles] from the back of his pick up truck in San Nicolás and the surrounding ranchos. Hilda worked with him selling paletas from the time she was seven years old until she went to the United States for the first time when she was twenty-two. She completed primary school when she was about fifteen, and had helped her mother around the house and worked with her father after that. Hilda was one of nine siblings, five brothers and four sisters. Everyone lived in Mexico and she was the only one who had ever migrated to the United States. All of them except her oldest sister, who lived in León, the state's largest city, lived in Rancho San Nicolás. Julián was one of ten siblings, eight brothers and two sisters. His father had died when he was young and all but one of his brothers had lived and worked in the United States at one time or another. Like Hilda, Julián had only completed primary school, dropping out when he was fourteen or fifteen, after attending intermittently from the age of ten. Upon dropping out of school, he went to work in the fields and tending goats, as well as doing short stints as a construction worker in León, biding his time until he would go to the United States like most young men from the rancho did. He would have to wait until he was twenty-one and his older brother, who had been living and working in the Dallas area, would pay for a coyote to take him north. Julián and Hilda had met in school but did not become romantically involved until shortly before he headed north for the first time in 1994.

JULIÁN'S FIRST TRIP NORTH

Julián had been able to go to school as long as he did because of the money his older brother Humberto had been sending home from Dallas, Texas, where he had been working. As soon as he quit school, Julián began to think about heading to the United States. A lot of his friends were going, as it was common for young men from the age of sixteen on to head north for the first time:

I was working at home and in the fields but I caught the bug [*me entró la espinita*] since other guys my age were talking about going to *el otro lado*. My older brother was sending money, but it was only enough for food. He didn't send it for us to spend on just anything we wanted. As you get older you want to buy things, like nicer clothes, new pants and shoes, but you can't

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afford it. You see other people coming back with nice clothes and all and so I decided to go, too.

Julián had to bide his time, however, since he didn't have anyone willing to pay for his trip north. He didn't have any money of his own, not even enough to get to the border, much less to get across it and travel into the U.S. interior. It had been years since his older brother Humberto had been back to San Nicolás. In Humberto's mind, Julián was still just a youngster, hardly ready to head north:

In order to be able to go you need to have people who will help you. My brother was up there. He was there for around six years without coming back. And when a person goes up there he thinks that the people back here don't grow. So I would say to my mother, "Listen, tell my brother to help me." Then when he finally came back, I told him, "Listen, I want to go over there, too." By then he could see that I was pretty strong. He said he'd send for me as soon as I turned twenty-one. But he warned me that I would need to spend at least a year there, in order to pay all the costs, that it wouldn't work for me to go just for a couple of months and want to go home.

So, finally, when Julián turned twenty-one, Humberto agreed to set him up with a coyote to bring him to Dallas. Although Julián was beginning a relationship with Hilda by then, his main motivation for going was personal—providing for a wife and children was not yet on his mind. As it turned out, he was able to build himself the house in which his family now lived with the money he earned on that first two-year sojourn in the United States.

My thinking at that time was to go and buy clothes and see what it was like up there. People said that it was real nice and all. And then, I'd see if I could make a bit of money to build a house back here. And thanks to God, I was able to save the money to build this house. And that's what I did in those two years.

In September 1994, Humberto took his younger brother to a coyote near San Nicolás that had been recommended by some friends who had crossed with him previously. They agreed that Humberto would pay the coyote \$500 when he got Julián safely to Dallas. Julián traveled with the coyote to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. There they stocked up on provisions for the hike they would make after crossing the river, which would take several days. They bought flour tortillas, which would not crumble and get moldy like corn tortillas would, as well as canned beans and tuna. They also bought gallon jugs of water for the trail. Then the coyote took him to some *pateros*.² The *pateros* took Julián, his coyote and another dozen or so

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migrants across the river in a launch. From there they began their march through the South Texas brush to get around the immigration checkpoints on the highways that led away from the border. Although Julián's coyote said they would only walk for three days, it turned out to be five, walking at night and resting during the day. Their food and water ran out on the third day, but they were able to refill their water jugs at *papalotes* [windmills with cattle troughs attached] they found along the trail. This water was not really fit for human consumption and could make you sick with diarrhea and vomiting, though this had never happened to Julián on this or other trips he had made. Julián said that, in his experiences, even "good" coyotes tended to lie a bit about how much walking their customers would have to do to get around the checkpoints:

I believe most of them lie. They know that if they say you will walk less they can charge you more, since people think it'll be easier than it really is. And once you're out there, there's no way you're going to turn back. That's why I think most of them lie.

Fortunately, it wasn't as hot as it could have been at that time of year, especially walking at night, and Julián was young and in pretty good shape.

On the fifth day, Julián and the other members of his group came to a small town—he thought it might be Carrizo Springs, but wasn't sure. The coyote told the group to wait for him in the brush while he went into town to pick up the car in which he would drive them to San Antonio. Because there were more than would fit in the car, he would make two trips. Fortunately, San Antonio was not too far away. The coyote drove Julián and several others to a house in San Antonio. From there he was driven on to Dallas, where he arrived in the middle of the night. He called his brother, who came to pick him up at the home of one of the coyote's collaborators. The brother arrived, paid the coyote his \$500 and took Julián home. He had made it.

Julián was understandably exhausted from the trip and rested for several days after arriving. He was anxious to start working and making some money, though, and his brother and some of his friends from Guanajuato helped him find work at a factory that formed sheet metal for a variety of uses. In order to work there, his brother bought him a fake state I.D. card and a Social Security card at a flea market. Julián was paid \$170 a week, working approximately forty hours. He lived with his brother and one of his older cousins, who had originally brought Humberto to Dallas and who was also Julián's *padrino* [godfather]. With this arrangement, Julián only had to pay fifty dollars room and board each week. Without such cheap

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food and housing Julián would not have been able to make a go of it in Dallas on his substandard wages. He didn't go out much and tried to limit his spending as much as possible. He was actually able to save a substantial amount of what he earned, especially at the beginning, though it seemed to get harder to restrain himself from spending on things he wanted the longer he was there. Two years went by quickly:

Honestly, the time went by fast. I really liked it there, although I had my girlfriend at home and we would write letters to each other. She would always ask me to come home and I wouldn't want to because I was happy there. A lot of people don't want to go home because they're out dancing and partying all the time, but I was never one of those people. I always just went back and forth between work and my house. On Sundays sometimes I'd go walking out to stores, since I still didn't know how to drive. I was scared at first because people would tell me that if I went walking around the black people would beat me up or the *migra* would catch me. But then you gain more confidence that nothing's going to happen to you. Even though I did hear that the migra was around, I was bored staying at home all day every Sunday. ... After two years I decided to go back because I wasn't able to stretch my money as far, I wasn't sending as much home to my mother, and I wasn't saving as much.

When Julián returned to San Nicolás at the end of 1995, he resumed his relationship with Hilda and set about building a house with the money he had saved. He knew how to build a cement block house from having worked construction in León a few years earlier and paid a friend to help him build it. It only took three months to build. Hilda moved in with him. But then, he was out of money and needed to head back to Texas to earn some more. He left again in April 1996 with the same coyote who had taken him two years earlier. The logistics of the trip were similar—travel to Nuevo Laredo, cross the river, hike through the brush for several days to get around the immigration checkpoints, and then drive to Dallas. This time, however, they got picked up by the Border Patrol several days into their hike through the brush:

I don't remember very well, but I was with my brother and one of my cousins. I remember we were walking along some railroad tracks when we heard a bunch of dogs coming up behind us. The guy who was leading us said, "Here comes immigration," and we looked down the tracks and we could see some lights that were moving. And he said, "That's immigration coming. Run!" I remember it was around midnight and we started running. We kept running until we came to a barbed wire fence. We couldn't hear the dogs anymore. We crossed the fence and the guide said,

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“We’ll stay here until dawn.” It was like five or six in the morning. We were all real tired from running and we all just fell down on the ground to sleep. When I woke up I saw the immigration agents climbing over the fence. My brother was next to me and I said, “They’ve got us.” They shined a flashlight on us and I remember they had their pistols in their hands. They said for no one to move. We were lying on the ground and we sort of half sat up and were sitting there and they told us not to stand up. I remember this well because my brother was sort of squatting already and they said “We mean sitting on your butt.” Then one of them went over and pushed him so he sat back down. And that’s how they caught us and sent us back.

Julián and his companions did not finger their coyote to the Border Patrol agents who arrested them, even though the agents asked them which one was the coyote. Like other migrants I interviewed, Julián said that he and the other migrants had planned with the coyote ahead of time what they would do if they were caught:

Julián: The guide always tells you just before you cross the river, “If they catch us or anything, you just say that we’re all just friends. Don’t tell them who’s leading you.” And since everyone who leaves from here is thinking they’re going to need him again, they think that if they say he’s the one who’s bringing them he won’t want to take them again. That’s what they’ve always told me when I’ve gone.

Spener: So this is common and everyone agrees to it?

Julián: Right, everyone agrees. They say that sometimes immigration scares the kids who are going for the first time and they say who the guide is, but these cases are rare.

Spener: So normally they don’t get scared and they don’t identify the coyote. A lot of time in the newspaper the Border Patrol says that people don’t identify their coyote because they’re afraid of him. In your experience, has that been the case?

Julián: Well, in my case, if I identify him, we know each other and he lives near my ranch. I don’t know what might happen to me or my family. Any person from a town like mine wants to avoid trouble. I think to myself, well if I tell the immigration agent that he’s the one, then they’re going to pressure more to find out more about how I contracted him, where he lives and all that. And it’s just easier to say no, we’re all just friends.

Spener: But do you feel like telling immigration who it is when they catch you?

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Julián: No, I never have.

Spener: So you weren't mad at the coyote? You didn't blame him?

Julián: It's not his fault. I think that if I were a coyote I would really try to get people there because that's how I'm going to make money. So they try to hide you and try to get you there because they make more money that way. If you don't make it they don't make any money and immigration isn't going to give them any money for giving people to them. So, maybe it's their fault but they do as much as they can so you don't get caught.

Back in Nuevo Laredo, Julián, his companions, and their coyote were all exhausted and their feet blistered from the days they'd spent walking before being caught. None of them felt up to another trek through the brush right away. The coyote suggested that they go back to Guanajuato to rest up before making another attempt to cross and they all agreed.

Julián could not stay long in San Nicolás. He was out of money and had no way to support himself. Moreover, his family needed his remittances to stay afloat and he was thinking about marrying Hilda, which also implied expenses. So, less than two months later he left for Texas again, this time with a different coyote from his area that had gained a reputation for success in getting through the Border Patrol's defenses. The logistics were once more the same, but this time he and his companions did not get apprehended and he made it safely to Dallas. When he got there, he paid the coyote \$700, lent by his brother, and went back to work at the sheet metal factory.

Julián earned a bit more money working at the factory this time around. Instead of \$170, he started at \$5.50 an hour and soon was making \$6.00 an hour. Because he was on the official payroll, however, taxes were deducted from his paycheck. He lived at his padrino's house again and kept his expenses low. He decided to go back home to San Nicolás in December of 1996, though, because he and Hilda missed each other so much. His padrino encouraged him to go home and either stay there permanently or bring Hilda to live with him in the United States:

This cousin who is also my padrino tells me that I need to bring [Hilda] there to live with me. Her mother is saying that she's making herself sick, she misses me so much. She's worried about her. And I ask him how I'm going to do that. So we start looking into how I might bring her. I asked him to help me. Then he also decided to go home with me. I don't remember exactly what the deal was, if he was getting his papers or something, because

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everyone else in his family had gotten their papers but him. In any event we went back together in late December.

Hilda was in agreement to go with Julián to live in Dallas. She really wanted them to be together. “What I want is to be with you,” she told him. “I’ll go with you wherever you take me.” They got a civil marriage certificate but did not get married in the church before they left. Julián’s padrino contacted a friend who knew someone in Laredo who took people across the border into Texas. Julián got in touch with the Laredo contact and agreed to meet him in a week. It was early February of 1997. This time they would cross the border in a very different way:

I remember we got to Laredo and my cousin’s friend took us to the person who was going to take us across. We got to his house in the morning and we spent the day there. Then in the evening they put some make-up on my wife and they did up my hair like a Chicano from over there. I asked them how we were going to cross. And they pulled out some little cards that showed that we were students, from the school over there. That we were going to pretend we were high school students. As we left they said that we should say at the first immigration checkpoint on the bridge that we were “American citizens.” So as we went across the bridge, there was a man driving, a lady next to him, and us in the backseat. The official looked at us and we just said “American citizens.” And that’s how we did it at the second checkpoint, too. And we made it with no problems.

After getting through the second immigration checkpoint, the coyotes dropped Julián and Hilda off at a highway rest-stop, where they were picked up by one of his cousins. The cousin paid the \$1,200 they owed the coyotes and drove them to Dallas.

LIVING IN DALLAS TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME, 1997-2000

Julián expected to go back to work at the metal-forming factory where he had last been employed, but when he went there, he found that they would not be able to take him back. While he was in Mexico, the government had begun to conduct audits of company employees’ Social Security records. His old supervisor told him he would be happy to have him come back to the factory, but he would have to have a valid Social Security number to give him. He advised Julián to get his papers in order and come back when they were. This, of course, was not possible for Julián to do, so he had to find work elsewhere. He found it in *las yardas*, i.e., doing yard work with a landscaping company for a while. This work did not pay well, however, and later on a cousin of his invited him to work with his employer, a construction contractor that ran heavy machinery—bulldozers, backhoes,

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and the like. By this time, Julián had gotten his driver's license and was thus qualified to be trained in operating such equipment.³ This type of construction work was reliable and paid fairly well. He was soon making ten dollars an hour, though taxes and other deductions were taken from his check.

Hilda got her first job working in a textile factory. She didn't know when she started to work there that she was already pregnant with her first child. The work there was strenuous and her boss was not willing to make special accommodations for her in terms of the tasks she was expected to carry out. She was having bouts of morning sickness and was very tired. With Julián's support, she decided to quit the job soon after she started it. It was hard for them to make ends meet. They were living in their own apartment and could not make the rent on Julián's earnings alone. They brought in a roommate to help defray their rent expenses. They also had payments to make on a used pick-up truck they bought to get around. Hilda got a job working at a Mexican restaurant a couple of months after their daughter was born, earning five dollars an hour. She arranged for one of Julián's cousins to babysit for them while she worked. She was hired to be a dishwasher, but the owner had her do a bit of everything—cleaning the bathrooms, chopping vegetables, making tortillas, and tending the plants on the grounds. The owner, who was also Mexican, was quite bossy and exploitative. She knew that Hilda didn't have papers and wielded that power over her.

She humiliated me a lot. And at the end she didn't pay me my complete check. She didn't pay me for all the hours I worked. I would tell her, "Señora, I worked more hours than this." Because I was keeping track of how many hours I worked. She said, "Well, if you don't like it, don't come back." She knew that I needed the job because, like I told you, we couldn't make it on my husband's paycheck. We had to pay the rent, the truck payments, diapers, formula for my little girl, and we wanted to save up some money to make a trip home. So I had to put up with it. Once I fell real hard at work because she was hurrying me to finish the dishes so she could close up. She said, "If you don't get those dishes done, I'll lock you up in here tonight. I have to leave." And I said, "*Sí, señora,*" but I slipped and fell because they had just mopped and the floor was wet. I hurt my back and my husband had to come get me and take me to a lady who massaged it to help me with the pain. I felt a little better and was able to go back to work. I told my boss that I had really hurt my back and needed to go to the hospital. And she said, "Don't even think about going to the hospital because I'm not paying for it." If you want to go to that *señora* and have her fix you up, fine. But if you go to the hospital

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you'll have to pay for it yourself. You won't get a cent from me."
Thank goodness the lady was able to help me and I got better.
That way we were able to save up some money and return home.

Hilda and Julián spent three years in Dallas on their first sojourn to live and work in the United States. They had worked hard but had barely been able to make a go of it economically. After three years away from the rest of their families, they were ready to go home for a visit. The pressure for them to return became acute, however, because of an ultimatum that Hilda's family made to her:

I left home without ever getting married in the church. My parents are very Catholic and once when I called home, my mother said "Your father says that unless you come home and get married you're not his daughter any more." And I felt really bad and I said to my husband, "Yes, let's go there and get married because I feel real bad that my father would say that about me, that I'm not his daughter anymore." And Julián said, "Fine, we'll have to save up some money to do it."

CROSSING TOGETHER THROUGH JUÁREZ, JANUARY 2000

After their wedding, Hilda and Julián stayed in San Nicolás for another couple of months. During this time, they made arrangements with a coyote who lived nearby in San Felipe, Guanajuato to take all three members of the family to Dallas via the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. They chose this coyote for two reasons. First, he came well-recommended and was married to a woman who was one of Hilda's father's cousins, giving them more confidence that he would keep the promises he made to them. Second, their crossing strategy with him did not involve any trekking through the desert. He would take them walking across the international bridge and then put them on a plane to Dallas from the El Paso, Texas airport, just across the border. Their baby daughter, who was one at the time, could go across the international bridge with no problem because she was a U.S. citizen by birth. The coyote, who had papers and maintained residences both in San Felipe and in the Dallas area, crossed his customers through Ciudad Juárez instead of Nuevo Laredo or Piedras Negras, other popular crossing spots for Guanajuato migrants, because his wife was from that city and his mother-in-law continued to live there and collaborated with him. He would charge them a total of \$2,000, requiring \$1,000 up front and the remainder to be paid upon their arrival in Dallas. They would pay him from a combination of their personal savings and loans from family members and friends in Dallas. It seemed like a good arrangement but the trip would turn into a terrible ordeal.

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Hilda, Julián and their daughter agreed to meet the coyote in San Felipe one day in March. He drove them to Ciudad Juárez in his pick up truck and dropped them off at a modest hotel. He said he would come for them in the morning to take them across the bridge. He arrived early the next morning. He brought clothes for them and dressed them up to look like U.S.-born Mexican Americans. Hilda thought he made them look like *cholos*, a pejorative term in Mexican Spanish referring to Mexican American gang-members and their distinctive style of dress.⁴ He then took Hilda and Julián with him to the international bridge connecting Ciudad Juárez with El Paso, Texas, leaving their daughter with his mother-in-law. As they approached the bridge, the coyote instructed them to walk behind him and tell the U.S. immigration inspector that they were “American citizens.” He did not provide them with any documents nor did he appear to have any relationship with the inspectors on the bridge. When Hilda and Julián went through the checkpoint on the bridge, they told the inspector they were U.S. citizens and they were waived through.⁵ To Hilda it seemed that it was *pura suerte*—just lucky—that they were allowed to pass. Once they were across the bridge, the coyote loaded them into a pick-up truck and drove them to a house where they waited while he went back to Juárez and pick up their daughter. When he returned with the baby he told them that he had gotten their plane tickets and they would head straight to the airport.

At the airport, Hilda carried their daughter in her arms and Julián carried their luggage. The coyote walked ahead of them, carrying their tickets. He said he would give them the tickets just before they boarded the plane. As they were walking behind the coyote in the airport, a couple of Border Patrol agents gestured to them to stop and demanded to see their immigration papers. Of course they did not have any and the coyote kept walking. They were arrested by the agents and taken to the INS detention center next to the downtown bridge that they had just walked across a couple of hours earlier. They were held there all morning, with their baby crying constantly because she was hungry and they had not had anything to eat before leaving the hotel in Ciudad Juárez. The agents eventually brought some crackers for her, which she ate quickly and fell asleep. They also brought “voluntary return” papers for Hilda and Julián to sign, which waived their right to a formal deportation hearing before an immigration judge. The agents also insisted that their daughter “sign” her paper by putting her fingerprint on it. The agents then released the family and let them walk back across the bridge into Juárez. As they were walking across the bridge, one of the agents warned them not to come back because if they got caught again, they would take their baby away from them. This, of

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course, was a phony threat, but Hilda said that the agents seemed to enjoy “humiliating” Mexicans like them.

Back on the street in Ciudad Juárez, Hilda and Julián debated what they should do. They had almost no money and nowhere to stay. Julián was in favor of going back to San Nicolás to regroup and come up with a new plan, but Hilda thought they should keep trying to cross since they were already at the border. Moreover, she said, they had no money to live on in San Nicolás and already had debts to pay to people there. After discussing it for a bit, they decided to retrace their steps to the coyote’s mother-in-law’s house. The coyote seemed to be expecting them when they arrived. He told them he was sorry about what had happened and that he would keep trying until they got across successfully. “He told us not to worry,” Hilda said. “He would figure out a way to get us across. ‘I’m going to get you some fake papers so you can get across. These papers will cost me five hundred dollars each, but I’m going to get them for you.’ And he got them for us.” The next day the man’s mother-in-law dressed them up as “cholos” again and they walked across the same bridge into El Paso. This time one of the immigration agents recognized them from the day before and checked their papers closely and took their fingerprints. When the prints did not match the prints embedded in the documents they were carrying, the agents demanded to know who had sold them the papers.⁶ Hilda and Julián insisted that no one had sold them the papers but rather that they had been given them. After an intensive interrogation, the agents “voluntarily returned” them to Mexico again. Once more, they walked back to the coyote’s mother-in-law’s house to decide what they would do next. It was late at night by then and the house was a long ways from downtown, up on the mountain. They had no money for a taxi and no way of calling the coyote. “We walked up there and there were a bunch of druggies [*mariguanos*] along the way, smoking and fighting with each other. My husband and I were just praying they wouldn’t do anything to us.” When they got to the house, the coyote was waiting for them. Again, he told them, “Don’t be discouraged. We’ll try again. My *cuñado* [brother-in-law] also takes people across, but walking. He has a trip leaving tomorrow.”

The next day the coyote from San Felipe took Hilda and Julián to see his *cuñado*. They found out that, in fact, he would be leading a group of nineteen people across the river that night, leaving at 9:00 PM. The *cuñado* said that they would have to walk across the border, but Julián and Hilda said it didn’t matter, that they just needed to make it to Dallas. They left their daughter with the San Felipe coyote and his mother-in-law, who would bring her across the bridge to meet them after they made it. This

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time the crossing would be extremely miserable and would result in arrest on the outskirts of Dallas.

They left that night at nine. It was a cold late winter-early spring desert night. The coyotes drove them in pick up trucks to the mountains on the edge of town. From there, they ran downhill until they approached a house near the river. A pack of dogs came out from the house and ran towards them barking and would not let them continue on towards the river. The coyote approached the house and spoke with the owner, he paid the owner some money, who then came out and tied up the dogs. The coyote and the migrants then waded across the river, which was quite shallow at that point. On the far side of the river they came to the cement-lined American Canal that both served for irrigation and immigration control purposes.⁷ There they lay down on the ground in silence upon seeing a Border Patrol agent walking nearby along the road scanning the terrain with his flashlight. When the agent passed without seeing them, the coyotes gave the go ahead for them to cross the canal. The water in the canal was swift and deep and many migrants had drowned in it over the years. Julián took Hilda's hand but she was still nearly swept away. Since she didn't know how to swim she was quite sure she would have drowned if another man who had already made it across had not given Julián help in pulling her from the water.

Once they all crossed the canal, they had to cross the highway that also ran parallel to the river in El Paso. They did not dare climb up the embankment to the road, however, for fear that the Border Patrol would spot them. Instead, they all crawled into a culvert under the highway that was clogged with garbage and debris. By the time they negotiated their way through the culvert it was three in the morning. There they waited for one of the coyotes to come pick them up in a truck to continue their journey. They were all wet and it was freezing cold that night. "We were all shivering," Hilda said. I couldn't even feel my feet. They were frozen!" Their ride did not materialize, however, and shortly before dawn the coyote who was leading them ventured out to find out what had happened to the driver. The rest of them did not dare leave the culvert, for they could hear the Border Patrol's dogs outside along the road:

The person that was supposed to pick us up didn't show up. The coyote went to find out what happened. We couldn't make any noise or anything because immigration was out there. We could hear their dogs out there. There we were. We hadn't eaten anything and we are all soaking wet. We were shivering, just stiff

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with cold. Finally at about five in the afternoon a van came for us and picked us up.

They drove for several hours towards Dallas. Hilda and Julián didn't know exactly what route they took, but they did not have to get out and walk around any immigration checkpoints on the highway. Late in the evening they arrived at a house near Dallas. An Anglo, English-speaking woman lived there. They had several rooms for the migrants to stay in. The woman and the coyotes told the migrants to shower, which they did. Unfortunately, they did not have any clean, dry clothes to change into after they bathed. The woman tied a big black dog to each door to keep the migrants from attempting to leave:

They tied a dog at each door. Some big black dogs. They put the dogs there so we couldn't leave. People were saying things like, "We're not far from where I'm going. I know how to get there walking." But the lady said, "You aren't going to leave here until they bring me the money for you." So people started calling people to bring the money and come pick them up.

People were still bathing and calling their friends and relatives to come get them when immigration agents raided the house:

That was what was going on when suddenly police were everywhere. They broke down the doors and sprayed the dogs with something that subdued them. And these big policeman came in with their pistols drawn and pointed them at us. A man was in the shower and they pulled him out, thinking he was the coyote. They shouted for him to open the door but he didn't want to because he was naked, not because he didn't want to open the door. The agents thought that he was the coyote and that he was hiding in there. So they broke down the door to the bathroom and pulled him out by his hair and threw him on the floor and kicked him around. The man was laying there naked! Then they got the man up and handcuffed him and shackled his feet. Then they handcuffed all of us and threw us into a couple of vans. They drove us to the immigration office and unloaded us off the van. They tied our hands and feet to some little benches and kept us chained there all night. We couldn't sleep because we were sitting there chained to the bench. We hadn't eaten and we kept asking them to please get us some water because we were thirsty. They finally brought us a glass of water and a flour burrito. We were there for two days, with me crying all the time for my daughter, because I had left her in Juárez. Finally they put us all on a big plane with a bunch of other people. They weren't deporting just us, they were deporting a whole lot of people. The plane was loaded full of children, some of them newborns. And they were all in shackles, too, like the adults.

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Hilda told me there must have been at least two hundred people on the plane, including some Central Americans in addition to her fellow Mexicans. They were flown to Ciudad Juárez. When they got off the plane that night, they were surrounded by Mexican police and their dogs, just as they had been on the U.S. side. In addition, she arrived back in Mexico barefoot:

I was barefoot because they had taken my shoes and they got lost somewhere. I don't know where they put them. They took all of our shoes and we were all barefoot. Before we got on the plane immigration made us take off our clothes. They took off our blouses, everything to make sure we weren't carrying—I don't know what!

Hilda said she thought that the coyote that was with them when the raid occurred must have had some kind of deal worked out with the immigration agents since he did not seem to have been detained. She and Julián never saw him again. In spite of the ordeal they had been through, Hilda was surprisingly complimentary of the treatment they had received from these coyotes, as well as the other migrants who traveled with them:

No, they acted right by us. Like when we were in the truck, they stopped to buy us chips and soda. ... I stuck by my husband the whole time, since I was the only woman out of twenty people. But all the men behaved themselves. They didn't say anything untoward [*no decían groserías*] and they acted right by me.

Hilda and Julián went back to their hometown coyote's residence in Ciudad Juárez to reunite with their daughter. He already knew what had happened to them since he had been in cell phone communication with his *cuñado*. This time he had another plan for getting them across: Another of his *cuñados* had a contact inside the U.S. consulate in Juárez who sold visas.⁸ It would take a couple of weeks to get them, but they would be real, valid visas issued to Hilda and Julián. The coyote felt responsible for all the bad luck and trouble that had befallen their family. Since their money had run out, he offered to let them stay with him in his in-laws house while they waited for their visas to come through. It took longer than expected, though: They stayed there a full month. It was not a wholesome scene. Their coyote's *cuñados*, although they did not live there, came in and out regularly. They smoked marijuana and injected other drugs in the house. "It was really awful, really sad there," Hilda said. The mother-in-law fed them though, mostly eggs, tortillas, and potatoes, and gave them their own room to stay in. Aside from the drug use by the woman's sons, they were treated respectfully and given what they needed to get by.

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Finally, the papers—new laser visas—came through. To make sure they would pass inspection, Julián walked across the bridge into El Paso alone. He showed the papers to the immigration inspector, who allowed him to enter the United States. He walked back across the bridge into Ciudad Juárez and reported the good news to Hilda and their coyote. The next day the whole family crossed the bridge with the coyote in his truck. The immigration inspectors checked their papers against the records in their computers and allowed them to pass. The coyote drove them all the way to Dallas in his truck. In spite of all their travails, Hilda and Julián felt that their coyote had treated them well, doing everything he could to get them to Dallas. “Those papers cost him a lot of money,” Hilda told me. “He paid more for them than he charged us. He stayed in Juárez the whole time until we made it. Remember, he was related to my father. We had a family relationship with him, too.” Perhaps in recognition of the repeated ordeals they had been through, the coyote never charged them the second installment of what they had agreed to pay him. Grateful as they may have been to have finally made it with this coyote’s help, they never communicated with him again and didn’t know if he was still in business.

The coyote dropped them off in Dallas at the house of a friend of Julián’s, but the friend was not there. According to Hilda, he was in Mexico for a visit. It was pouring down rain, they had not eaten, and they only had two dollars between them, a one dollar bill and four quarters. They found a store to buy some bread and bought a soda from a vending machine:

It was just raining and raining. My husband said, “Let’s go and buy a *bolillo* [a type of Mexican baguette]. He had two dollars, one bill and four quarters. There was a soda machine there. We decided to buy a soda to wash down the bread, since we didn’t have any more money. I put the quarters in the machine and a whole bunch of quarters poured out, like five dollars worth. My husband said you never expect God to help you, but we didn’t have a cent. Our baby’s diapers were soaking wet and we didn’t have any to change her into. With that five dollars we bought some more soda and some diapers. We waited around until it stopped raining and walked over to the place where a couple of my husband’s cousins lived. They invited us to stay with them for a while.

LIVING IN DALLAS TOGETHER FOR THE SECOND TIME, 2000-2003

The travails that Hilda and Julián had gone through to make it to Dallas at the beginning of 2000 presaged the difficulties they would encounter living there on their second sojourn. Julián did not find work right away when they returned, and then when he did it was working for low pay in *las*

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yardas again. Hilda was obliged to go back to work at the Mexican restaurant, whose owner she so despised. She worked at night and left the baby with Julián, getting home around midnight. Her boss was as overbearing and cruel as ever. When Julián got a better job running construction equipment again, she quit. It wasn't long, however, before she had to find waged work again. Julián's cousins' house was filling up as more of their siblings arrived from Mexico to live there. Julián and Hilda decided it was time for them to move out and find their own apartment, which they did, a tiny studio for which they paid about three hundred dollars a month.

Hilda got a job with a crew that cleaned schools at night. She started at 8:00 PM and worked into the wee hours. Sometimes Julián did not get home from his construction job until after Hilda had to leave for work, since his construction sites were sometimes far away and evening rush hour traffic in Dallas-Fort Worth could be dreadful. On these occasions, Hilda would leave the baby in her crib with the TV on and lock the door on the way out. She wasn't usually home alone for more than a few minutes, but Hilda was nonetheless unhappy about the arrangement. She would get home in the middle of the night, exhausted—they worked her hard at the cleaning job, too—and her little girl, now two years old, would wake up and want to play. After about a month of this, Hilda quit the cleaning job. By this time, she was pregnant with her son. Because they needed the money, she found another cleaning job, this time working in a private hospital. One of the benefits of working there was she would get free prenatal care and be able to give birth at the hospital. She presented the Social Security card and state I.D. she had bought on her first sojourn as the work documents the hospital required. Around that time federal authorities conducted the same type of audit of Social Security numbers at the hospital as they had at the factory where Julián used to work. The hospital was obliged to fire about a hundred Mexican workers, including Hilda. She not only lost her job but also access to the prenatal care and right to give birth at the hospital. She ultimately gave birth to her son in one of Dallas' public hospitals, where, she said, nearly all the patients were Mexican.

Hilda did not go back to waged work after her son was born, opting instead to stay home with both her children. She got pregnant again not long after her son was born and gave birth to a second daughter in early 2003. After the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York in September 2001, the construction company where Julián worked went bankrupt and he was forced to go back to yard work for a time, which paid considerably worse. Without Hilda working, they couldn't really make ends meet. They didn't have enough beds or clothes for everyone in the family. They

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scavenged dumpsters for old mattresses. Hilda applied for food stamps, as well as food from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program,⁹ but her immigration status and inability to understand English over the phone stymied her efforts. She stayed indoors all day with her children while Julián worked. The neighborhood was not very safe, she didn't drive, and she didn't have enough money to take her family elsewhere to do things. Although Hilda was grateful and happy that Julián and the kids were all together, things were not going well for them economically, nor were she and the kids happy. Although it was a wrenching decision, Hilda decided, and Julián concurred, that everyone would be better off if she took the kids back to San Nicolás to live:

I was crying because I wanted to go home. I was happy being with my husband, but I had to do it for my kids. It pained me to see them just looking out the windows like they were in jail, all locked up there. And then they were getting sick all the time, too. So I said to my husband, it would be better if I went back. It was June. My littlest one was only three months old. The three of us got on the bus and rode to San Felipe, where my *suegra* [mother-in-law] was waiting for us. My husband stayed on in Dallas until December. We didn't have any money. He said he'd be able to save up some money after we left. With all of us there we couldn't save at all. The rent would come due, and then we had to buy diapers—and we had two kids in diapers then. We just couldn't make it. ... I told my husband, I've been trying so hard, but I just can't make it here with my kids. I'm suffering a lot, I told him. I'm locked up in a little room with them all day. Back home I have my house, my furniture, and my family. I love my husband and now I miss him but I also love my kids and I'd do anything for them. That's why I decided to go back.

Another reason Hilda wanted to return, Julián later told me, was that her father had been sick and she wanted to be in San Nicolás to help him and her mother if he took a turn for the worse at any point. So, Hilda and the children returned to San Nicolás in June 2003. Julián stayed in Dallas through the end of the year, trying to save up some more money and arrange to bring a pick-up truck back with him that the family could use at home in Mexico.

JULIÁN'S MOST RECENT TRIP TO THE UNITED STATES

Before Julián went back to San Nicolás in December of 2003 he was trying to get the title to a pick up truck he had bought straightened out so he could bring it back with him legally. Having a truck in San Nicolás was imperative, given its isolation and lack of adequate public transportation in the area. He had owned a 1995 pick-up free and clear, but he would have

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had to pay a large amount in import taxes to bring it back to Mexico with him, since it was still less than ten years old. To get around that problem, he sold his 1995 truck and bought a 1988 pick-up that he could take to Mexico without paying so much in taxes. Unfortunately, he was not able to get free title to the new vehicle in time for him to get home to his family for the Christmas holidays and he left taking care of the matter to the cousin to whom he had sold the 1995 vehicle and who had not yet paid him. The idea was that as soon as the title came through, the cousin would arrange for someone to drive the truck to Julián in San Nicolás and pay for it out of the money he owed him. Months passed and the vehicle never came. Julián called his cousin repeatedly, who claimed that he had never gotten the title to the truck from the lot where Julián had bought it. Aside from the inconvenience of not having a truck to drive in San Nicolás, Julián could not avail himself of what waged work was available in the area. Finally, in August 2004, he decided he needed to go back to Dallas to get the truck or, if that was not possible, earn some money to buy another one.

To get back to Dallas, Julián contacted a coyote who operated out of Rancho El Alto [a pseudonym], just a few kilometers away from San Nicolás. He went to this coyote based on the recommendations of some friends who had crossed with him recently. He had a good reputation for success. Rather than borrow money from friends and relatives to pay the coyote, Julián worked out a deal with his cousin that he could cancel the debt to Julián for the pick-up truck he had bought by paying Julián's coyote when he arrived in Dallas. The cost for this trip would be \$1,400, considerably more than the last time Julián had traveled with a coyote several years earlier. The logistics for this trip were similar to those of his first cross-border trips a decade earlier. Julián took the bus to Nuevo Laredo with the coyote and several other men from his and neighboring ranchos. They waded across the river near Nuevo Laredo and began a four day march through the sweltering brush to get around the immigration checkpoints on the highways leading away from Laredo.

Although they did most of their walking at night, when it was cooler, it was still an extremely difficult trip. Julián handled it well, under the circumstances, for he had been playing baseball a lot during his last few months in San Nicolás and was in better shape than he had been in a while. As was typically the case on treks like these, the water they were carrying with them ran out after the second day. They refilled their water jugs from cattle troughs the coyotes located along the route. This water was not really fit for human consumption, but, as Julián said, they were so thirsty they knew they had to drink it. Although Julián did not get sick from the

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water, a man in his forties who was making the trip with his teenaged son did. The man was already having a hard time keeping up. He was tired and his feet were covered with blisters. Then, late on the third day, he began to vomit the water they had drunk. The coyote tried to encourage the man to keep going:

The reaction of the coyote was to try to encourage him, keep his spirits up. He told him not to drink so much water and that he should try to eat a little more to have the energy to get there. He really couldn't eat much, though. On the last day, we walked during the daytime. They usually walked you at night. [The coyote] told us that we had to get to where they were going to pick us up. And by about noon, this man couldn't carry his *mochila* [knapsack] anymore. He wanted to leave it behind, but he needed the clothes when he got where he was going. I took his pack for a couple of hours and then another person took it. ... The rest of us tried to help him. The coyote had worked it out with the person who was going to pick us up that we'd get there by a certain time. So he tries to pressure you so you get there by then. When the man couldn't keep up he told us to go on, but we let him rest for a while to get his spirits up. And he made it walking on his own. We were all really tired but we held on and made it there in time.

It was a good thing that the man was able to keep going. Julián said he and others would have carried them on their shoulders if they'd had to, but if they had left him behind he almost surely would have died. "We were out in the middle of the *monte*," he said. "It would have been hard for anyone to find him out there."

One of the coyote's collaborators picked up Julián and the other migrants with his car at the edge of the monte at about four in the afternoon. He drove them to a house near San Antonio, where they arrived at about six. From there, the coyote called to another collaborator in Dallas, who then drove to San Antonio to pick up Julián and the others that were headed to that city. They also called Julián's cousin to let him know that he had made it and that they needed the money he had agreed to pay. Much to Julián's dismay, his cousin was several hundred dollars short of the \$1,400 they coyotes expected. Fortunately, Julián was able to negotiate a deal with his coyote from El Alto whereby his cousin could give the money he had to the driver when they arrived in Dallas. Julián would pay off the rest of what he owed as he was able once he started working. He would send the money home to Hilda in San Nicolás and she would pay the coyote, who lived nearby. And that's how it worked. Upon arriving in Dallas in the middle of the night, Julián's cousin met him and the driver at an agreed upon spot.

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His cousin paid the driver the money he had, the driver said good-bye and left, and the cousin drove Julián back to his house.

The next day, Julián went to work as a “yard man,” cutting grass, blowing leaves, trimming bushes, and weeding gardens. Within a couple of months, though, he was back at work in construction, earning ten dollars an hour as an operator of heavy machinery. He began sending money home to Hilda, who paid off the coyote. He was finally able to get the title to the truck he had bought, after battling the owners of the lot who had sold it to him. It was terribly important for Hilda and him to have a car in San Nicolás, especially for Hilda when he was not there. She explained the situation as follows:

I don't drive but he wants me to learn in case he has to go back north. So I don't suffer so much here. Right now I have to go everywhere by bus. To get groceries, for example. And it's a real hassle [*se batalla mucho*]. And if my kids get sick, I have to be able to get them to the doctor. That's why our dream is for my husband to bring a pick-up back with him.

Julián worked through the end of 2004 and kept on until October 2005. Hilda missed him terribly. He told her he would get the money together to have her come back with the kids, but their oldest daughter, who was in school by then, didn't want to go back to Texas:

I missed my husband terribly after he went back to Dallas. It made me sick. He said, “You know what? I'm going to get the money together to bring you back. Bring the kids. But my older daughter refused to go.

“You go, *mamá*. I'm not going.”

“Why not, *hija*?”

“No, *mamá*, up there you've got us locked up inside all the time. There are no parties or anything up there.”

She likes her freedom. You can see how they run around here. It's not like that up there. Up there they're always stuck inside watching television from the time they wake up till the time they go to sleep.

Julián would have liked to return home earlier, but one of his aunts in San Nicolás required surgery to remove a cancerous tumor from her stomach, and he was called upon to help defray the costs (his brother José had also put up money for her medical care). He also wanted to save up as much as possible so he would not have to go back to the United States for at least

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another year. When I interviewed him in January 2006 had the following to say:

God willing, I'd like to spend this year with my family, if I can find work here. I don't know about next year. Hopefully I can get a stable job here. If not, I'll go again. Right now my kids miss me. If I go out anywhere, my wife tells me they ask her what time I'm coming home, how many days I'm going to be away. So like I say, I'd like to try not to have to go back up there again.

One thing they did quietly, without telling either set of parents, was arrange for Hilda to get a tubal ligation so they would not have any more children. They felt that three children were enough and realized it would only complicate their situation further if they had any more. She was happy with her kids and was glad to see them happy to be living back in San Nicolás.

Fortunately, at the time I interviewed him, Julián had gotten work building a bridge across the river that ran by San Nicolás. This was providing him with some badly needed waged income. When the project was finished, he thought he might look for construction work in León or in Querétaro. He wasn't very excited about the idea, though, because it meant being away from home for at least a week at a time. In addition, the income he could earn working in construction in Mexico was enough to live on only if his family incurred no extraordinary expenses. "I can make enough for us to live on," he said, "but if someone gets sick you have to go into debt. If you have to go into debt, then it's difficult to repay that money here. So that's when you start thinking about going up there [to the United States] to pay off your debts."

Julián actually preferred living and working in Dallas to living in San Nicolás. In spite of all the difficulties she had had as a wife and mother in the Dallas area, Hilda was restless in San Nicolás and also would not be averse to going back. Both of them agreed, however, that they would not want to go back until after their kids were bigger and had finished school in Mexico, even though all three were U.S. citizens by birth:

We're going to try to give our children their schooling here. And then when they're mature enough to know right from wrong, we can go back. Because I've seen how the kids are up there, the teenagers. I see how the kids carry on up there and that's why I want my kids to go to school here. Maybe the schools are not as good here, but I don't like the way schools are up there. I like the fact that they learn English, but I don't like the way the kids treat each other. ... I have friends who've told me about how kids at school get forced into drugs and things. If we keep them here while they're small, we won't have any problems like that. If we

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go up there and they're bigger we've got a better chance since they can tell you if anyone is giving them problems and try to help them deal with it. That's why my wife and I want them to study here, at least through the eighth grade. Then we can decide whether we all want to go back up there.

JULIÁN'S REFLECTIONS ON COYOTAJE AND THE DANGERS OF CLANDESTINE BORDER CROSSING

In addition to speaking with Hilda and Julián about the particulars of their various cross-border trips and their sojourns living and working in Texas, I spoke at length with Julián about his opinions about coyotaje as a strategy for getting to the United States. Julián's reflections about coyotaje can be organized into three general categories: 1) his characterization of the social origins, trustworthiness, and quality of service provided by the coyotes he had dealt with directly or whose reputations he knew from the experiences of other migrants who lived in his community; 2) his assessment of the level of risk of making coyote-assisted clandestine border crossings and who should be held accountable when migrants suffer abandonment and even death on the trail; and 3) the amount of money migrants had to pay to coyotes to get to their destinations in the United States. In addition, Julián had opinions about the possibility of participating in an expanded guest-worker program that might permit him of future opportunities to labor in the United States as a legally-contracted, temporary or seasonal guest worker. Not surprisingly, Julián viewed participation in such a program as an attractive alternative to coyotaje as a strategy for pursuing employment opportunities north of the border.

Characterization of coyotes and their relations with migrants

For Julián, the line that distinguished coyotes from their customers in his community in rural Guanajuato was a blurred one. From his point of view, coyotes and the other members of his community were cut from the same cloth. Julián's assessment coincided with that of migrants I interviewed in Monterrey, Nuevo León who regarded their coyotes as being the local migrants that best "knew the way" to get across the border:

Spener: What opinion do you have of the persons that have taken you across? They say lots of bad things about coyotes in the press in the United States. In your view, what are they like? Are they respectable people? So-so people [*gente regular*]? Bad people? How do you see them?

Julián: I think they're people like us. They try to earn a little more money without having to fight so hard for it. I put myself in their place and I think if I were them, well, I'd also try to take

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people across, since if I cross them and they pay me when I get there, I'll be able to save up a lot of money working like that. ...

Spener: And are these people, shall we say, "professionals"? In other words, is this the only thing they do for a living or do they work over there [in the United States] or back here [in Guanajuato] when they're not taking people?

Julián: Most of the ones I've known, they start out the same as us. Somebody takes them first. They work over there [in the United States] but from going back and forth so many times, they memorize the route [*se empiezan a grabar el camino*]. Then they start taking companions with them without charging them, since they're going anyway. Then they decide to do it for a living.

Spener: So, they're normal people? They're not, like hoodlums [*no son así como cholos y gente así mala onda*]?

Julián: No, I believe that they're people like us.

Spener: The times that you've crossed, have they acted right? Have you seen any abuses? Do they carry pistols, threaten anyone, that type of thing?

Julián: No, not the persons that I've gone with.

Spener: So they've acted right by you?

Julián: They've conducted themselves just like they were one of us [*se han portado, pues, como cualquier compañero*].

Although Julián and his family members and friends in San Nicolás were perfectly willing to talk with me about their experiences traveling with coyotes and share with me their opinions of them, I was not able to interview any of the local coyotes directly, in spite of my efforts to contact them. Julián was not surprised by this. "No," he said, "they wouldn't talk with you because they don't know you." In other words, they were suspicious of me as an obvious outsider to the community and someone who might even work for the U.S. government. I asked him, though, how coyotes knew whether it was safe to talk with fellow Mexicans about what they did for a living and how they went about providing their services to migrants. I wanted to know how they knew who was really a potential client and who might want to get information from them for other purposes. Julián explained to me that the coyotes were somewhat protected from exposure because of the system of word-of-mouth recommendations they used to get customers:

The people they don't know come to them through somebody they do know. It's like a link between people who know one

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another. You know me, I know another guy, and the other guy knows someone else. So that other guy doesn't know you but he comes to you through this link and says so-and-so sent me. So, they do work with people they don't know but they come to them through somebody they do know. Then they'll tell you how everything works.

In addition to protecting themselves from exposure to the authorities, Julián explained to me that the coyotes had additional reasons to prefer working with customers who had been recommended to them:

Julián: The customer asks them how much it's going to cost and how much he'll have to walk, and when he'll have to pay. And they tell him this number of days and all that. But then if they know you well, like on this last occasion with me, we didn't speak with one another but we knew each other by sight, so when I tell him I don't have enough money he said, we could work something out. He could wait for me to pay him later, you know? And with other persons he didn't know, they demand the money right now. They'd better have the money as soon as they get there since they don't know them and they know there are a lot of people out there who can't pay. ... I've heard of cases where they won't let people go until they've paid a certain amount. But these are people that they are more mistrustful of [*que les tienen un poco más desconfianza*].

Spener: So, they don't negotiate so much with people they don't know?

Julián: No, because they want to choose people that pay like they say. I haven't seen it myself, but they say that when they get there a lot of people don't pay or don't want to pay.

Julián said he had heard about coyotes elsewhere committing many abuses against their customers but had not had any problems himself or heard about any local coyotes doing such things to people from around San Nicolás. He explained that the in-group system of word-of-mouth recommendations protected both migrants and coyotes alike, at least to a certain extent:

Julián: In any event you try to go with people you already know for the same reason that if they know you they have more hope that someone will be waiting for you with some money. When I went with that first coyote, I didn't know him, but I went with him because I knew that I had all the money I needed waiting for me once I got there.

Spener: So, it was a good deal for him to work with you.

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Julián: Right. It was good for him because I had all my money ready over there. I believe that anyone who is a *pollero*¹⁰ likes working with people they know have their money lined up. They won't have to wait at all. And if they know the person, they're willing to take more of a chance.

In spite of the fact that both migrants and their local coyotes in rural Guanajuato were well-known to one another and had a long history of more-or-less mutually-beneficial collaboration, tragedies occasionally befell migrants from the San Nicolás area as they travelled to the United States with their coyotes. Such a tragedy had recently befallen a man from a neighboring town and Julián offered his surprising assessment of who was responsible for what had happened.

Abandonment and death on the trail

Julián's brother José had told me that the coyotes from El Alto had recently left behind a man on the trail who was traveling with them. The man had died from heat and dehydration. I asked Julián if he had heard about this incident and what he thought about it. I was surprised that he did not blame the coyotes for what had happened to the man. As can be seen in the transcript below, Julián had thought about this issue and had some specific reasons as to why he did not think the coyotes were to blame:

Spener: Your brother was telling me last night that word was going around that some coyotes [from around here] had left somebody behind on the trail not too long ago. Did you hear that, too?

Julián: Yes, I heard about that when I was up north.

Spener: Where?

Julián: I was in Dallas when I found out about that, but I didn't believe that they would have left him behind. It was the coyote that I crossed with the last time I went, so I didn't believe it. Then I began asking around, and according to the conversations I had, I'm not sure if it's true, but according to what they say, this person couldn't walk any more and felt real sick. He just couldn't do it any more. And they say that they tried to help him and move him along, but he said he didn't want to go any further. So the guide didn't know what to do. He said, "I have the obligation to take these other persons, but I've also got a commitment to him." And according to what I was able to find out, one of the man's companions said [to the coyote], "You go on ahead with those persons and I'll stay back with him." And that's what I heard they did.

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Spener: In other words, another member of the group stayed back with him?

Julián: Yes, he stayed back with him. Then when the guide got to where they were picked up, he told the other guy who was going to drive them, that he should stop a little further down the road to call the Border Patrol to tell them to go look for them back down the trail. And when they found them, the *muchacho* had already died.

Spener: So it was a young guy, a boy that had died?

Julián: Right, he was young.

Spener: So, how do people react to this event? What is *your* reaction?

Julián: Well, I *did* react.

Spener: Is anyone at fault?

Julián: Well, no. My reaction, like I said, I don't know. I don't think it was their fault. It's just a question of whether your body will take it or not. Because I've told people that the first time I went that I felt tired. But I didn't know anyone else on that trip. I'd never laid eyes on any of them before. So I thought to myself, if I decide to stay behind because I don't have the strength to go on, I'm going to be left alone because none of the others knows me. Nobody is going to stay back with me. So I tried to find the strength from I-don't-know-where to keep up with them. So I think that if that person [the young man who died] had really gotten weak, I don't know, it might just be that his own body just couldn't take it. So I believe, in my theory it's not anyone's fault.

Spener: Might this event have a negative impact [*puede perjudicarle*] on the coyote?

Julián: Well, yeah. But it's like I've been trying to explain to you, if it's true what they told me, it wasn't his fault because he was trying to save the ones he took on ahead with him and he was sending help for the ones they'd left behind. So I think he tried to help them equally. He'd lose a bit more credibility in my eyes if he hadn't tried to help the people who stayed behind.

Spener: You told me before that sometimes the coyotes lie about how far you're going to have to walk. In this case, would your opinion be different if the coyote had lied about how far they were going to walk?

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Julián: No, because like I told you, it's happened to me almost every time I've gone that they tell you it'll just be one day and really it's two. So practically everyone has in their mind that it's going to be more than they tell you. Almost all of us are aware of this.

Julián offered some additional information that was especially telling. The coyotes in El Alto continued to take people from the region across the border and continued to receive new customers. And if Julián decided to go back to Texas, he would probably travel with these coyotes again. When I asked him, somewhat incredulously, if he would ask the coyotes about the man's death to get a more complete explanation before heading north with them, he had the following to say:

Well, I'd have to go with them to know for sure, to see. I probably wouldn't ask them about it here. I'd probably ask that they tell me about it out in the *monte*, because that's when you talk most about these kinds of things. Like what happened that time with the guy who was with you? Things like that. Out in the *monte* [brush] is when I'd ask them. But if I see that people keep going with them, then what they've said about them isn't necessarily true.

Julián's hesitancy to blame his coyotes for the death of the man from a neighboring village runs contrary to the way that coyotes are typically portrayed by government authorities and the press as ruthless criminals who operate with little regard for the health and well-being of the migrants that travel with them. Julián was not the only migrant I interviewed who were reluctant to hold coyotes uniquely responsible for migrant deaths on the trail, contrary to repeated assertions by the authorities that such deaths resulted directly from the callousness with which "smugglers" treated their "merchandise."

On the price of clandestine travel to the United States

One of the open questions about U.S. policing of its border with Mexico has to do with how far the costs of entering the country clandestinely will have to rise before migrants will desist from making the attempt. The costs of hiring a coyote to get across the border grew dramatically for Julián between the time he made his first trip to Texas in the mid 1990s and when he made his most recent trip in 2004. In 1994, his brother had paid a coyote just \$500 to take him to Dallas. On his last trip he had paid \$1,400, nearly three times as much. When I asked Julián how much money he would be willing to pay the next time he had to go to the United States, he had the following to say:

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Spener: How much would you be able to pay? The Chinese, for example, sometimes pay as much as \$50,000 to be taken to the United States. Right now, you're not even paying one-tenth of that amount.

Julián: I would never pay that much. I'd only pay as much as I'd have to, depending upon my need. Right now it seems a lot to me to pay even \$1,000 because, thank goodness, I don't really need to go up there now. The last time I needed to go, \$1,400 didn't seem like that much to pay, first because I really had to go and second, I had some money owed to me and I wasn't going to have to go into debt to make the trip.

Spener: So far, then, you've been able to pay whatever they've charged you. So, do you think that people will keep going in spite of the cost?

Julián: I do. I just think it depends on how badly the person needs to go.

One of the main things that Julián and Hilda's experiences demonstrated was that the nearly threefold increase in coyote fees over the course of a decade had not yet produced a situation that prevented Julián from traveling to the United States to work when family finances required him to do so. The informal system of kin-based credit available to them owing to the presence of close relatives in the United States was still capable of lending money in sufficient quantity and on favorable enough terms to meet the increased costs of clandestine travel.

On the possibility of participating in a guest-worker program

Although coyotaje continued to work as a viable migration strategy in spite of the build-up of U.S. force at the border, Julián made clear that some form of legal migration option would be vastly preferable to the way he and his family had been managing their cross-border existence to date. He was familiar with the existence of the H-2 agricultural guest worker program and of the proposals that were being made in the United States to have some sort of new, larger scale temporary work visa program for Mexicans like him. Not surprisingly, he found the idea of participating in a program like this to be an appealing alternative to the precarious sojourns he had been making north of the border as an *indocumentado*. He saw it as a way for him to make sufficient money to support his family without having to be away from them for such long and uncertain periods of time.

Spener: They're proposing a new kind of bracero program so that Mexicans could go to the United States with a three-year

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contract or something like that. Would you be interested in this kind of a program?

Julián: Sure, I'd be interested in something like that. Like I was telling you, I was very happy to be working up there. I remember when I was doing yard work, a friend told me that people were getting these permits to go work up there for nine months. And I said that's what I wanted to do, to be able to go there and work for a while and then come back here to rest for a while. I'm always going to be working to support my family. I'd rather have some kind of permit so I could go up there for seven, eight, or nine months and then be back here with my family for three or four months without having to work. It'd be great to have a permit that would let you go back and forth without any problems. I'm really envious of the people I know who have papers. It only costs them \$100 to make the trip. And even if I have \$200, what I'm going to do with that? That's not nearly enough for me to make the trip! I really wished I could have had one of those permits so I could come down here to see my family for the week-end and then be able to go right back to work up there.

CHAPTER 5

You Can Cross Any Time You Want

Beto was a coyote who had been deported from the United States after being arrested while driving a van full of migrants near Alpine, Texas, just north of Big Bend National Park. He had lived and worked for five years in Austin, Texas in the late 1990s before his arrest. When I met him in 2002, Beto was living back home in the small town of La Cancha, Nuevo León, working as a recruiter of customers for a group of coyotes based at the border in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. In our interviews he told me how he came to be a coyote, how the groups he had worked with operated, how the business of moving migrants across the border had changed in recent years, and how he viewed his future as a coyote.¹

I wound up in the small town of La Cancha, Nuevo León in 2002 by traveling there with the father of a Mexican American woman I knew in San Antonio, Texas. She was from the McAllen area in South Texas and her father, Rigoberto, had grown up in La Cancha before moving to the United States as an adult.² I had told her about my interest in hearing migrants' border-crossing stories and she directed me to her father, who offered to go with me to La Cancha to introduce me to his friends and family there, who could tell me more about the town's experience with sending its residents to live and work in the United States. La Cancha is a small town of about 2,000 people located a few dozen miles outside the Monterrey metropolitan area. Agriculture, ranching and small-scale commerce are its main economic activities and many of its residents have migrated either to Monterrey or Texas, whether for temporary sojourns or to live and work permanently, as Rigoberto had done. One of Rigoberto's brothers ran a small, open-air store along one of the main highways leading away from Monterrey, where he sold canned goods, beer, and a limited variety of other foods and dry goods. The empty lot behind the store was a place where a few dozen semi- or intermittently employed men from La Cancha and other small communities would gather in the afternoon to socialize while drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and occasionally making roast-kid tacos over an open fire, as they did in honor of one of my several visits. I first met Beto, a former migrant and occasional coyote, around this fire. I

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interviewed him a few days later and then again on a subsequent visit to the store.

Beto was 24 years old and lived with his wife and her parents. He had recently married her and she was pregnant with their first child. Beto had been born and raised in La Cancha and had never lived anywhere else in Mexico. He attended school through the second year of *secundaria* (equivalent to the eighth grade in the U.S. system) before dropping out and going to work. He first went to the United States to try to earn some money when he was about 15 years old. This was in the early 1990s. He went back and forth several times with a friend who was a couple of years older than he was. The friend was a small-time coyote who took local people to Texas, a few at a time. Beto acted as his helper and as a consequence did not have to pay his friend the fee he charged his customers. Beto went back and forth with his coyote friend a half a dozen times or so over the course of a couple of years and learned the route well. Afterwards, he himself took people across on his own for a year or so. In his late teens, Beto crossed the border clandestinely and went to Austin, Texas, where he lived for about five years. He worked construction there during the week and fell in with a band of coyotes that brought migrants across the border through Big Bend National Park. He made a lot of money, had several girlfriends with whom he had three children, and eventually got arrested driving a van full of migrants through Alpine, Texas. Beto spent six months in a federal prison in Pecos, Texas before being deported back to Mexico.

Map 5.1. Boquillas crossing route used by Beto & collaborators, 1999-2000



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Beto had been back in La Cancha for about two years when I met him. People who knew him told me they thought he might also have been involved in drug-dealing in Austin, but no one knew for sure. He had worked as a welder at a Pemex refinery near Cadereyta, Nuevo León for a while, but he had working there by the time I met him. Though he no longer traveled to the United States, he recruited customers for a group of coyotes based at the border in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, who paid him \$100 for every migrant he brought them. Beto had an old Chevrolet sedan parked behind the store and some of the other young men that hung out there would go into the car with him from time to time. I wasn't sure if they were getting high together, if Beto was their local seller of marijuana, or both—or neither. No one discussed it and I didn't want to press the issue. One of Beto's friends told me, in an affectionate tone, that Beto was a *bandido* and very *mañoso* [crafty, tricky]. No one seemed to regard him as any kind of real criminal, though, and his relations with everyone coming in and out of the store appeared to be cordial and *tranquilo*. He was not an overtly fearsome or threatening character in any way, more of a handsome Johnny that a protective father might be worried about taking advantage of his teen-aged daughter. He was happy to talk with me about his experiences.

TEEN-AGED COYOTES OUT FOR AN ADVENTURE

Beto's teen-aged coyote friend used a simple method to get people across the border and beyond. They would swim across the river near Matamoros, Tamaulipas and then walk to the rail yards in Harlingen, Texas. There they would hop a freight train to Houston. After having made the trip with his friend a number of times, Beto began to take two or three people across himself every few weeks. His customers were all young men from La Cancha and the surrounding ranchos. He charged them U.S. \$450 to be taken to Houston:

Beto: My friend taught me the way. Back then it was really easy to cross. You almost never had any trouble getting people through. It cost them \$450.

Spener: What was included in that "package"?

Beto: Nothing was included except the train and the hike to the train! [Laughs]. That was it! And they had to pay all the expenses and food on the way. Bus tickets. Food. Hotel. Everything you needed to pay for.

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Spener: So, they had to cover all the trip's expenses, including yours.

Beto: Exactly.

After swimming across the river, Beto would walk with his customers to a store in Los Indios, Texas. From there they would call a taxi driver who would charge them ten dollars per person to drive them to Harlingen:

We met this person originally just by calling the taxi company's number they gave us at the store and he was the one they sent to get us. And afterwards we reached an agreement and he said, "Okay, call me whenever you need me." He gave us his number. Then we'd just call him and he would come for us. Nobody else, just him, because other drivers, if you called them, might turn you into immigration.

Having the taxi driver to rely upon was a great boon to them, since it eliminated having to walk long distances through the brush and across farm fields in South Texas, which could be very tough, especially in the hot summer months. Beto contrasted the conditions he had encountered in South Texas with what he had heard about the Arizona desert:

Around here where we work it's a lot different. A lot of people cross out there in the desert and they die, for lack of water, of thirst, for lack of food, or whatever. And those people do have problems. Out there in the Arizona desert. But not around here. It's very rare for this to happen here. ... Here you walk through cotton fields and then you walk along the railroad tracks. And you just keep walking like that, drinking water, going up to ranch houses to ask for water, asking for food. We didn't have to do that so much since we took a taxi and all, but a lot of people do, out on the edge of town, asking for help along the way.

If there were a lot of U.S. immigration agents patrolling the region and checking the trains, Beto and his customers would hop [or get chased] off and hole up in motels in the Kingsville area. Beto did not charge his customers until they got to Houston, although, as noted above, they had to cover all the expenses along the way:

Well, a lot of people used to charge here before they left. But we would charge them when we got there, once people began working. They'd pay us a week or two after they started working. We trusted them since we knew everyone we took there.

Working exclusively with people from the La Cancha area was advantageous to Beto and his coyote friend in other ways, too. He had been

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caught leading people across by the Border Patrol on several occasions but was never fingered as the coyote by his customers: "Since we all knew each other, nobody ever said who the coyote was. We were all just going together, that's all." The worst thing that had happened to him in those days was getting picked up by the Border Patrol in a little Texas town a considerable distance away from the border. Because there were only five people traveling together and they were a couple of hours' drive back to the border, the authorities detained Beto and the others for a couple of weeks until the Border Patrol had enough people to justify a trip back to the border to send them across the bridge into Mexico. Then they were returned not to Matamoros, where they had originally crossed, but to Reynosa. Beto said the Border Patrol sometimes did this in order to punish migrants and discourage them from trying to re-enter the United States immediately.

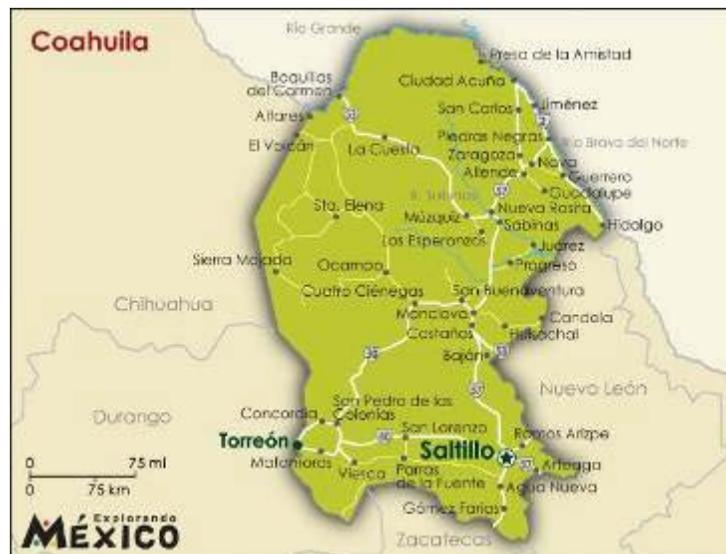
CARPENTRY & COYOTEADAS IN AUSTIN

By the mid 1990s, Beto had tired of going back and forth across the border as a low-cost, local coyote. He decided to try his luck working in Texas and went to Austin with some friends. Like many undocumented Mexican men in the boom economy of the late 1990s, Beto found work as a carpenter in the burgeoning construction sector and could sometimes earn as much as six-hundred dollars a week. It was through his work as a carpenter that he fell in with a small band of coyotes who ran a considerably more professional operation than his *rascuache* [unsophisticated, seat-of-the-pants] enterprise in the Lower Rio Grande Valley had been.³ This group of coyotes brought a group of twenty to twenty five Mexican migrants to Austin a couple of week-ends per month in rented vans, charging \$1,300 per migrant. Unlike most other coyotes running migrants to Austin, Beto and his collaborators took a route through Big Bend National Park in West Texas instead of a South Texas route entering the United States from Matamoros, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, or Piedras Negras. Specifically, they took their customers from Músquiz, Coahuila to the small town of Boquillas del Carmen, just cross the river from the Rio Grande Village camping area in the national park. At Boquillas, they would take their customers across the river in a rowboat before loading them up into vans and driving through either Alpine or Marathon, Texas before headed east to Austin.⁴ Because there was no full-time immigration checkpoint operating on the U.S. side along this route, migrants who travelled with Beto's group did not have to walk through the desert to avoid inspection by the authorities, making for a much quicker and safer trip.

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In spite of the fact that Beto and his collaborators were capable of transporting hundred of migrants per year generating hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenues, they were only five of them involved. Three people, including Beto, one other driver, and the leader of the group, lived in Austin. Another man was in Boquillas and put migrants up in his house when they arrived at the border. The fifth man recruited customers in several towns in the state of Zacatecas, where he was from, and arranged for their transportation to Músquiz by bus, and then the last three hours by truck or van over the rough dirt roads to Boquillas. In border towns it is not uncommon for the Mexican police to try to muscle in on the business of moving migrants across the border. Beto's group, however, had never had to pay off the police. He said he thought there were a lot of coyotes like him that the police did not even know about. Moreover, before 9-11 there was little vigilance on the Boquillas route on either side of the border. He said he knew of a dozen or more groups of coyotes who took migrants from different places through Boquillas on different days of the week. There was never any shortage of customers who wanted to travel with his group and there were no turf fights among the different groups of coyotes that he had ever heard about on this route.

Map 5.2. State of Coahuila



Beto noted that although Central Americans were much more lucrative to transport than Mexicans—they might pay as much as \$7,000 to be transported to the United States—he and his collaborators had not had any

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experience transporting them. All of their customers had been Mexicans and most had been *zacatecanos*. There were a couple of reasons for not having Central American customers, he said. First, the Central Americans usually had their own *coyotes de planta* [in-house], who organized everything from start to finish from their own countries. Second, he said, it was a lot more risky to move Central Americans than it was to move fellow Mexicans, since you could be arrested and imprisoned by the Mexican authorities as well as the U.S. authorities:

Beto: For Mexicans, they'll usually give you six months. And for a Central American, they'll give you five years at a minimum.⁵

Spener: Really? Why?

Beto: Because you're crossing three borders, not just one.⁶

Spener: So it's riskier to transport Central Americans?

Beto: On the Mexican side and the U.S. side. On both sides. Real dangerous [*mucho muy peligroso*].

Spener: So, who takes the Central Americans?

Beto: There are coyotes who make that their business. They charge them five, six, seven thousand dollars per person.

Spener: And are they Mexicans or are these more international groups?

Beto: Mexicans and Central Americans, both together.

Although Beto and his colleagues did not transport any non-Mexicans, he said his group did not discriminate by either gender or age: "We took men, women who were seven or eight months pregnant and women with little kids. We took all kinds of people."

Running migrants through Boquillas was quite a lucrative business for Beto and his fellow coyotes. He estimated that it only cost them thirty to forty dollars per migrant to get them across the border to Austin, including expenses for gas, food, lodging, and renting vans. That meant that they might net as much as \$17,000 or \$18,000 dollars on a trip. In addition, there were few barriers to getting a business like this started, even after the intensification of border enforcement by the U.S. authorities in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁷ Beto had this to say about the ease of entry into the business nearly a year after the attacks on September 11, 2001:

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Spener: What's going to happen with this business now? They tell me it's a lot more difficult to cross.

Beto: No, it's the same as it's ever been. You cross whenever you want. If you really want to cross.

Spener: And how do you know this?

Beto: Because I know it's easy to do. It isn't hard.⁸

Spener: But haven't they put a lot more Border Patrol . . .

Beto: They're putting out a lot more patrols and more people, true, but no, no, no, it's not difficult. It's easy. It's just more exciting now! [laughs]

Spener: So, any person who really wants to makes it.

Beto: Exactly. The one who wants to can do it. If he wants to get there, he gets there.

Spener: And the person who wants to start his own [coyotaje] business can do it, too?

Beto: Not just anyone. You have to know the routes you have to take.

Spener: How do you learn this kind of thing? Well, in your case, somebody taught you here in the Valley, right?

Beto: Right. Hooking up with somebody who knows the way, and then you know the routes and you can set up your business. You work out an agreement with two or three people over there [in Texas], with two or three people here [in Mexico], and then you rent cars, vans, Suburbans, whatever you can rent. And then you guide them across. That's all you need to get working.

The money to be made was enticing not only for the *jefe* of a small group like Beto's, but for everyone involved as well. People got into the business because it was *dinero fácil* [easy money]. You could make a lot quickly, *sin trabajar, nomás caminar* [without working, just by walking], Beto said, laughing at his own word play.⁹ Here is what he had to say about the money he was making working with this group in 1999 and 2000:

Spener: Does the boss of one of these businesses get rich?

Beto: Everyone involved gets rich!

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Spener: But here we are sitting in a little shack. You're certainly not rich! What happens with that money?

Beto: Well, what happens is that when they threw me in jail, I lost all that money.

Spener: And how much had you built up, if it's not indiscreet to ask?

Beto: Look, I had five cars and I had, like, \$18,000 cash in hand.

Spener: Five cars, right, but those were for the business.

Beto: No! Those were just for fun! Good cars, too! Recent models. I had an '89, a '93, others from the 90s. Since you know you could wind up in jail, you don't want to have a bad time, you want to have a good time. So you spend about as much as you've got.

Spener: But your boss, then

Beto: Now *he* has money. They've never caught up with him. He came from here to take people across, too, but they never caught him like they caught me.

Spener: And he works in construction, too?

Beto: Right. He earns money from that, too.

Spener: And working [as a coyote] just on the week-end, you really can make a lot.

Beto: Right. You can make six or seven thousand dollars in a week-end! But then, when you wind up in jail, you're going to lose it all.

Beto's run as a high-roller came to an abrupt end in the spring of 2000 when he was arrested by the Border Patrol near Alpine, Texas transporting a group of twenty-three migrants. Thirteen were in a rented van and another ten were in his own 1989 Ford LTD Crown Victoria station wagon. Unlike the times he had been apprehended leading migrants to hop freight trains in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, this time the migrants he was transporting, who were strangers to him, identified him to the authorities as the coyote:

Beto: It was logical for immigration to accuse me as the coyote because I was driving. And they also scared the people, threatening them, saying that if they didn't say who the coyote was they were all going to jail—that was a lie. But the people got

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scared and said I was the coyote. And then I was in jail for a month in Alpine before they sent me off to Pecos, Texas. And it was there where everyone testified and finally they said that I wasn't the coyote. That they'd arranged things with somebody else.

Spener: I don't know if I understand. If you weren't the coyote, who was?

Beto: My friend was. I was the driver.

Spener: What's the difference?

Beto: Well, it's all the same since I was the one who went to get them. But the coyote is the one who you make the deal with. The one that you're going to pay. He's the one who collects the money at the end of the trip and then gives me my share. But he's the one who collects.

Spener: And he's your boss?

Beto: Exactly. He's my boss.

According to Beto, the reason that the prices coyotes charged had risen so much in recent years was not so much because of any greater expense or difficulty they encountered in crossing the border brought about by intensified U.S. enforcement efforts, but rather because of the greater risk of arrest and lengthy imprisonment that coyotes were facing. What had happened to him was illustrative of the situation:

Spener: Why have prices gone up so much?

Beto: Because it's harder than it used to be. You used to only pay a couple of hundred dollars. Now it's 1,300 or 1,500.

Spener: Why does the coyote have to charge more now?

Beto: Because it's gotten harder. There didn't used to be so much Border Patrol. Well, there was, but not like now with the infrared binoculars and radars and all the things they have. And that's why they charge more. And before they didn't used to sentence a coyote to prison.

Spener: But, in that case, are they charging more because they have to work harder to get people across, because they have to make more attempts, or what?

Beto: They charge more now because with the first arrest it's six months in prison. It used to be a month, a couple of weeks, or

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even just overnight and they'd let you go. That's why they're charging so much more now. Because of the risk of going to prison.

Spener: So, it's because of the risk, not so much because it takes longer or is harder.

Beto: No, in fact now it's even quicker, because before you used to just walk most of the way. Now you just walk a bit and then you're in a car. And before it was almost all walking and then battling on the train. That's why it's faster and easier now.

In the federal penitentiary in Pecos where Beto served his sentence, about half the prisoners were coyotes and the other half were drug dealers.¹⁰ The penalties for "alien smuggling," he said, were now nearly as severe as for drug trafficking.

Under the circumstances, and especially now that his wife was pregnant, Beto had given up on going back to Texas to work, whether as a coyote, as a carpenter, or both—at least for the time being. "You have to really think about it!" he said. "It'll be five years if they catch you again!" He told me he had gone back to Austin once since getting deported, for about a month, but he had the law after him and decided to return to La Cancha. At the same time, he thought that most coyotes would continue to operate, in spite of the build up of agents and equipment guarding the U.S. side of the border and the greater risk of incarceration. "People are going to feel a certain pressure to get out," he said, "but those who want to keep working will. If they can't keep crossing in one place, they'll find another way." In fact, he was still thinking about going back to work full-time as a coyote in the future, in spite of all the risks:

Spener: You would take the chance of going back into business on the other side of the border again?

Beto: Once I were on the other side again, I'd work for a few months in construction, and then if I could reconnect with my partners, I'd go back to bringing illegals across again.

Spener: So, you'd do it.

Beto: Definitely!

Spener: You want to go back to doing it.

Beto: Right.

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Spener: But aren't you scared that they'll catch you again? They're putting all these people in jail now.

Beto: Right, for five or ten years. Right! But the money kills the fear! [chuckles] I'd like to go back in a year or so. Maybe I'll give you a call over there in another year.¹¹

After interviewing Beto, I realized that he was the nephew of Delia, the wife of Rigoberto, the man who had brought me to La Cancha to learn more about the experiences of migrants there. When I had interviewed Delia and Rigoberto in their home in the McAllen area before going to La Cancha, she had told me that she had a nephew who had worked as a coyote in Austin and had been arrested. She made very clear that she did not approve of him or his lifestyle. She had heard rumors that he had beaten and ripped off several women from La Cancha who were trying to get across the border. In subsequent interviews with other people in La Cancha I learned that she was mistaken about Beto having been involved in that incident. Here is what she had to tell me about her nephew before I knew I would subsequently meet him:

He's got a record with *la migra* now and has to stay in Mexico. He spent some time in jail and everything. But that's what he used to do, living in Austin and bringing people across. And then the *migra* caught him. And I'm Mexican but I don't approve of this. He was illegal and he was bringing in illegals. And that's wrong. ... Kids like him just want easy money. Fast money. And my nephew, he's only twenty-three years old, and he saw that was the best way for him to make some money. ... He's my nephew but I don't like the way he lives. ... He's just one example, him and so many others that come here to work. It's because they want to achieve something. Like we've been doing. We almost never go out. No dances, nothing like that, because we want to save and invest in something. But these kids are just living wild [*se la pasan loqueando nomás*], like nothing is ever going to happen to them. And he got to the point where they arrested him and he had to give it up because if they catch him again, he's going back to jail.

WORKING AS A RECRUITER FOR OTHER COYOTES

Although Beto thought it was inadvisable for him to work as a coyote in Texas for the moment, he had stayed in the business in a more marginal way, working as a recruiter in the La Cancha area for some coyotes based at the border in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Although he and his former

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partners in Austin generally had moved migrants through Boquillas, they had also gone through Piedras Negras-Eagle Pass on a few occasions as well, so he had some experience on that route. Ironically, though, he got connected to the coyotes in Piedras Negras through one of their members that he met while he was in prison:

I met him on the day I was getting out of prison, after serving my six months. He was getting out on the same day. He told me he worked out of Piedras and I told him I'd been working out by Big Bend. We exchanged phone numbers and all that. And we've been in touch ever since. That's how the collaboration began.

The deal that Beto struck with these coyotes was that they would pay him one-hundred dollars for every migrant he brought them, fifty dollars when he arrived with them in Piedras Negras and the other fifty after they arrived in their destination in Texas and paid their fee. It wasn't especially lucrative for him given that not nearly as many people in the La Cancha area were migrating to the United States as from the communities in Zacatecas with whom he had worked in the past, but it was a way for him to make some money. He imagined that it would be a good strategy for other coyotes to follow if, like him, they had been arrested on the U.S. side and faced the risk of serious jail time if they were caught again.

Beto said there were many groups of coyotes that operated in Piedras Negras but that a lot of them were dishonest. "They just take your money and run," he told me. The coyotes he worked with were reliable, he said, and would really get you to Austin or Houston, charging you when you got there. They operated in the most typical way, i.e., they would walk people through the brush around the immigration checkpoint on the highway, pick them up on the other side of the checkpoint, and then drive them to Austin or Houston. Since these coyotes worked mainly through word-of-mouth recommendations, not by recruiting strangers at the bus station, they had to be concerned with their reputation among customers and their friends and kin. This put some pressure on them to do a good job. "You have to act right [*portarte bien*]," Beto said, "because it's not in your interest to discredit yourself [*no conviene quemarte*] because people won't go to you anymore. You know what I mean? You discredit yourself. It's that simple."

On my second visit to La Cancha, Beto had just returned from dropping a couple of men off in Piedras Negras with his collaborators there. As I was talking with a group of men around a pick up truck parked next to the store, Beto walked up and one of his friends asked if the men had made it to Austin yet. Beto said he hadn't heard yet but expected to hear from them

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any time now. A discussion ensued about how southern Mexicans had a much harder time making it to the United States than did northerners like them. The reason for this, they said, was that the southerners had not had as much experience in making the crossing and did not have the connections and experience that helped northerners make the crossing without mishap. The southern Mexicans would arrive at the border and connect with coyotes who recruited them cold at the bus station. Border coyotes, the men in the group said, were not like guides from around La Cancha and were not to be trusted. I asked them, then, if it wasn't contradictory that Beto was taking members of the community to border coyotes rather than taking them across himself. They said no, it was different in this case, because these coyotes wouldn't *chingarles* [fuck them over] because Beto was bringing them. The coyotes were under pressure to act right because people in La Cancha knew who they were and would know if they treated their community's members poorly. If that happened, not only would they not get any more business from La Cancha, but people from La Cancha could denounce them to the Mexican authorities, who could, in turn alert the U.S. authorities about them. Later, I asked Beto how realistic this was, given that the Mexican police at the border were often in cahoots with coyotes. He said that it could work if people went to the Mexican federal authorities in the Distrito Federal, although no one in La Cancha had ever had to do this. He did say, however, that coyotes were afraid of prosecution by the Mexican authorities because they could get up to twenty years in prison if convicted. "It's a real risk," he said. "Coyotes don't have it so easy."

REFLECTIONS ON THE BUSINESS OF COYOTAJE IN THE EARLY 2000'S

In addition to asking him about his personal experiences working as a coyote, I talked with Beto about the business of coyotaje more generally and how it is regarded by others. We touched upon several interrelated issues in these discussions, including the differences between large-scale and small-scale coyotaje operations, what the relationship between coyotaje and drug-trafficking was, what relations between migrants and coyotes were like, and the abuses that some coyotes inflicted upon the migrants that hired them.

The question of abuses committed by coyotes was fresh in my mind because the Instituto Nacional de Migración had been running public service announcements on Televisa warning migrants of the danger of hiring coyotes to cross the border. The night before one of my interviews with Beto I had seen these announcements on television in my hotel room

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and had also watched a news story about a group of migrants that had died from dehydration in the desert of California's Imperial Valley. I asked Beto, who had also seen the announcements, what he thought of them.

Beto: It's good that they're doing that because there are coyotes who behave badly and abandon people out in the desert. It happens, but not so much around here. Here in Nuevo León, for example, or in Coahuila or Tamaulipas. It's out there by El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juárez, and out there in California where all these things happen. ...

Spener: But that still leaves us with the question of whether there are only a few good coyotes and a lot of bad ones or vice versa.

Beto: There are all kinds [*Hay de todo*]. A lot of good ones and a lot of bad ones and you don't know who you're going to get.

Spener: But what should the person who wants to cross do so as not to fall into the hands of ...

Beto: You need to know the coyote. Who he is. Where he's from. Or someone else who knows him. So you know he won't abandon you out there.

Beto said that one of the reasons coyotes would leave migrants behind on the trail if they couldn't keep up was because they often charged migrants half or more of the total payment at the outset of the trip. This meant that the coyotes could still make a great deal of money even if the migrants never made it to their destination:

Lots of times it's because they've already charged half the money up front. If they're charging 1,500 dollars and they've already gotten 750 dollars from ten people, it's still good money. It's 7,500 dollars. So if they have a problem, they can just as well leave people and head back themselves. They lie to them and say they're going to try to get some water or food, or whatever. And they leave them there but keep their money.

One of the main strategies migrants could pursue to avoid this, he said, was to refuse to pay much money up front. In fact, he said, a lot of migrants he knew would only travel with coyotes whom they did not have to pay until they arrived safely in their destinations. He also said that migrants should travel with as many other people they knew as they could. There was strength in numbers on the trail:

They should always try to go with a group of people. Several, at least. If you're traveling alone and you don't know anyone else

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on the trip, you can get left behind more easily. But if you're going with a bunch of people, and there's only one coyote on the trail, he can't leave them behind, since there are a lot of them. The more people there are, the safer it is. Together you have some leverage.¹²

Regardless of whether or not the television commercials contained any useful information, Beto did not believe that they were likely to dissuade many migrants from attempting to cross the border with the assistance of a coyote.¹³ Moreover, migrants knew it was more dangerous to cross without a coyote than with one:

Spener: Do you think potential migrants pay much attention to these commercials?

Beto: Not at all. [chuckles]. People don't believe them. Well, they do scare some people, but not too many. The migrant just wants to get there. And around here you don't see so many of those cases. Around here anywhere you cross there is water, there are ranch houses, and all that. Out there in Arizona and California, it's pure desert. ... Out there they have it a lot worse. ... Where we make our crossing it's not desert, you know? There are places for you to get water and you go up to a ranch house and ask for food and they give it to you.

Spener: But there are people here that have died on the trail, from dehydration and other things.

Beto: Yes, but those are people who are crossing on their own and don't know what they're doing. People who haven't made the crossing before, you know what I mean?

Spener: So, it's better to go with a guide.

Beto. *Ándale* [you've got it].

Spener: Someone who knows the way.

Beto: Exactly.

Beto also believed that migrants were better off traveling with small coyote organizations than with groups that moved large numbers of people. The reason for this, he said, was that coyotes that moved smaller numbers of people tended to be more connected to the communities they served and better known by their members:

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Those big groups treat people badly. Mexicans treating other Mexicans they're taking there badly. If they see that someone's not going to make it, they leave them behind. But the small organizations, you're taking people you know and you can't abandon them. Either everyone gets there together or everyone goes back together.

One of the questions I posed to Beto was how migrants could know whether the coyotes with whom they planned to travel were reliable and trustworthy or not. Coyotes, he said, developed reputations via word of mouth recommendations from migrants who were satisfied with their services. Coyotes that either abused their customers or who did not routinely get their customers where they wanted to go would not get the kind of recommendations that reliable coyotes depended on for recruiting their customers. Unreliable and/or abusive coyotes were able to stay in business only because novice migrants arrived at the border without having been recommended to a specific coyote or group of coyotes:

Beto: You don't know if they're bad until you're living it yourself, until you're walking and they don't wait for you or if they can't get you across. That's when you know who acts right by people. And who doesn't.

Spener: But how is it possible for the ones who don't act right to stay in the business if everyone knows...

Beto: No, what happens is that people arrive at the border and go with people they don't know at all, right? The problem is they don't know the people. But it doesn't happen more than once because once they know them and they know what they're like, they'll look for someone else.

Beto also insisted that once coyotes were identified as being good, that they tended to live up to their reputation. They felt pressure from migrants to get their job done expeditiously. "People are always placing pressure on you to get them there," he told me. "They really want to get there. And once they see that the coyote gets the job done, they say he's a good guy, he's going to keep getting the job done." He also claimed that there wasn't usually a lot of turnover among guides, so that if you were recommended to a particular coyote or group of coyotes that had taken a friend or relative across successfully in the past, you were likely to be led by the same guide or set of guides:

Spener: Isn't there a lot of turnover in these groups? Really, the members of these groups that people are going to get to know are the guides, right? The ones who lead them through the brush.

YOU CAN CROSS ANYTIME YOU WANT

But how do you know you're going to get the same guides?

Beto: No, they're almost always the same people, the same guides. It's unusual for them to change them since the guide is the one that knows the trail and its current conditions. He knows when the Border Patrol agents change shifts and all that. It's not in their interest to change guides because they lose too much control that way [*ya se desubica el control*].

Because there had been a lot of emphasis by government officials and in the press on the increasing size and criminality of "human smuggling" organizations on the border in response to tightened U.S. immigration enforcement, I asked Beto whether the smaller-scale coyote operations were getting squeezed out of the business by bigger, organized crime "mafias." He did not see this happening. He had sometimes bumped into other coyotes with other groups of migrants while he was en route with his customers but had never had any troubles with them. Most of the groups of coyotes that he knew about involved fewer than a dozen people and were not headed by a mafia "capo" like the Mexican drug cartels were. He also insisted that drug-trafficking and coyotaje were typically separate businesses. He had heard of some people moving both drugs and migrants, but he had never seen it himself. When I mentioned that some Border Patrol agents were saying that drug traffickers were leaving the narcotics business to move people instead because there was now real money to be made, he said that he had not heard of or seen anything like that himself. Beto was skeptical about this happening because, he said, the penalties imposed on coyotes were approaching those imposed on drug-traffickers and he thought the money made by traffickers was still better.

Another question I asked Beto about had to do with coyotes arming themselves, whether for protection or to enforce the deals they made with migrants. He insisted that no one he had ever worked with as a coyote had been armed. He acted surprised at my question about whether he ever worried about his own safety since migrants usually outnumbered their coyotes significantly and there were many other groups of coyotes competing with his. The migrants he said, were "very peaceful people." All they wanted, he said, was to get where they were going, reunite with their family members, and start working. "They're not looking for any trouble," he said. Moreover, migrants were typically pretty compliant with the things coyotes asked/ordered them to do. They seldom challenged their coyotes' judgment or authority once the trip was underway since they were reluctant to do anything that might delay or jeopardize their arrival. He also had not had any experience with migrants refusing or not being able to

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pay once they had arrived in Houston or Austin. For this reason, neither he nor his collaborators had ever felt the need to be armed to ensure payment. He described the typical scenario of migrants waiting for their contacts to come through with the money for their passage as follows:

You're in your apartment, in your house. And you say to them, "They're going to come for you. They're bringing the money and you're going to stay here until they bring the money." . . . You take care that they don't leave, but you just hang out chatting with them, watching television, eating, or whatever, while they're bathing. . . . And everyone who goes, it's very rare that they don't have the money. Everyone has the money lined up. . . . Their relatives up there get the money together ahead of time. It's not in their interest not to be able to pay, because they may have another family member they want to bring later on.

Although it had never happened to him, Beto said that if people couldn't pay, as a coyote he would simply not "deliver" them, even though they had already made it to their destination city. People didn't necessarily know exactly where they were and neither did the friends and relatives who were waiting for them.

When I asked Beto what his customers thought of him, as opposed to what he thought of his customers, he said he wasn't sure, but did know that some of them appreciated what he had done for them:

Spener: What do you suppose their attitude is towards you as a guide? What do they think of you? Do you have any idea?

Beto: No! Well, who knows? [laughs]

Spener: Do they thank you ever? Do they greet you?

Beto: Yes, on occasion I've bumped into people that I've taken over there. You bump into them and they say, "What's up? How are you?" And there are even some people I've become friendly with, too. With these people, you bump into them, they greet you, and they feel some appreciation [*te agarran aprecio*], since you did right by them and got them there.

Whether or not Beto's customers appreciated his work on their behalf, Beto said he felt good about his work as a coyote, even though it was against the law. He didn't feel like a criminal and he had no regrets about what he had done for a living.

Spener: How did you feel about doing all this? I mean, it's illegal in the United States. As far as the United States is concerned, you're a criminal.

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Beto: A criminal, exactly! [laughs]

Spener: I don't mean any offense, but according to the laws of the United States, by definition you're a criminal. So, how did you feel about what you were doing? I mean, in moral terms?

Beto: Well, I was just helping my people. The Mexican. Of course I didn't do it for free, but I was giving them a hand.

Spener: So you didn't feel like a criminal.

Beto: No, not like a criminal. I never killed anybody, I never robbed anybody. Nothing like that. I just helped people out!

Spener: Did anybody ever suffer any mishap [*desgracia*] while...

Beto: [emphatic] No, nobody.

In spite of the fact that the Border Patrol had arrested him on several occasions and had sent him to federal prison for six months, Beto regarded his old persecutors without rancor and even some measure of understanding. He did not hold a grudge against them for what had happened to him and did not seem to feel that any injustice had been committed against him:

What are you going to do? That's their job. And it's all right. We each have our job to do. Their job is to avoid us getting over there and our job is to get people over there. So we've each got our job to do and the guy that won, well, he won! Each of us has to do what he has to do. It makes you mad when the Border Patrol catches you, but that's what they are paid to do. They're just doing their job. They act right for the most part. Of course you don't want to get them mad. Anyone will treat you badly if you provoke them.

CHAPTER 6

From Matamoros to Houston— and Back Again

“From Matamoros to Houston” tells the story of a coyote named Paco, who from 1995 to 2002 made his living guiding and transporting Mexican and Central American migrants across the border surreptitiously. A childhood friend recruited him into the business at a time when Paco was unemployed and had a wife and young children to support. What started out as a temporary, part-time job quickly turned into a full-time, fairly lucrative career. Paco quit working as a coyote in early 2002, as the risks of prosecution and lengthy incarceration in the United States grew and the crooked police that demanded protection money from him in Matamoros raised their rates beyond his willingness to pay.

Paco [a pseudonym] was a coyote I interviewed in Houston, Texas in September 2002.¹ I had been referred to Paco by acquaintances I had made in Brownsville who had told me that he had been a coyote for a long time and could tell me a lot of things I wanted to know about operation and evolution of the *coyotaje*² business in recent years in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The acquaintances gave me Paco’s cell phone number and told him I might call him. He did not answer when I called, so I left a message. He called me back within the hour. I made arrangements to meet him at a gas station the next day in Houston and then drove to his apartment, following his pick up truck in my own car. It was a week-day morning and when we got back to his apartment, his wife needed to leave for work, leaving Paco to care for their three preschool children.³ My tapes of the interview feature all the whoops, shouts, crying, laughing, TV playing in the background, and admonitions familiar to the parents of young children. Needless to say, these were not the conditions I expected to find a professional coyote living and working in.

LIFE BEFORE BECOMING A COYOTE

Paco was born in Brownsville, Texas in 1968, to Mexican parents who resided across the river in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. He lived the first ten years of his life in Matamoros before moving to Los Angeles with his family when he was eleven years old. He attended junior high school and high

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school in L.A. and when he left school he went to work in his family's business running a small cutting room in that metropolis's dynamic apparel industry. In the mid 1990s there was a downturn in the industry as competition from Mexico heightened with the advent of NAFTA and the family business went bankrupt. Now in his late twenties, with married with two young children, Paco moved to Houston, Texas at the invitation of a cousin, who said he could find him a job working construction. When that didn't materialize, Paco took his family back to Brownsville where rents were cheaper and he still knew a lot of people. Although the cost of living was much lower in Brownsville than in Houston, it's also much harder to find a decent job. Unemployment there is typically several percentage points higher than elsewhere in the United States, even during times of economic expansion. Several months after arriving, Paco was still without work and had a family to support. Around that time, he was invited by a childhood friend from Matamoros, named Juan (also not his real name), to help out with his coyotaje business. Paco could be especially useful in the business because, although he was Mexican through and through, he was a U.S. citizen by birth and could move back and forth across the border without restriction. The coyote tried to recruit Paco's brother-in-law as well, but he was afraid to get involved in this illegal activity. It was 1995.

GETTING STARTED

What Paco's Matamoros friend wanted him to do was safe and easy. The friend did not have papers to enter the United States legally, but Paco did. He asked Paco to drive a car with Texas plates across the bridge from Matamoros into Brownsville. He was then to drive up highway U.S. 77 through Harlingen, Raymondville, and the South Texas ranch country, past the Border Patrol checkpoint at Sarita, to the small town of Riviera, Texas, a few miles south of Kingsville. He would leave the car on the side of the highway early in the evening. Later in the evening, the friend would lead a small group of migrants through the brush around the Sarita checkpoint and pick up the car and drive it on to Houston. Once a group was past the Sarita checkpoint, they were pretty much home free to Houston, since there were no more immigration checkpoints to go through and there were far fewer Border Patrol vehicles on the highway north of Kingsville. The first few times he did this, the friend paid Paco \$300. After Paco gained the friend's confidence, he was paid \$500 per trip. The money was easy and paid Paco's rent at a time when he still had been unable to find work in Brownsville. Then the friend offered to make Paco his partner.

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To enter the coyotaje enterprise as a full partner, Paco needed to come up with funds to invest in the business. He was able to do this by saving money from what he was being paid for driving as well as by selling an old car he had. The “investment” he needed to make did not involve housing, phones, cars, or other types of equipment. Rather, it involved “buying” groups of migrants from *enganchadores* [recruiters, literally “hookers”] who recruited *aspirantes* [aspiring migrants] at the Matamoros bus station. In those days (1995-1996), *enganchadores* were typically paid \$20 per migrant that they brought to the coyotes, who would then cross them into the United States. When an *enganchador* would bring five migrants to Paco’s partner in Matamoros, the partner would pay the *enganchador* \$100. Then Paco and his partner would pay a *patero* along the river another \$30-\$50 per person to cross the migrants into Brownsville. Because they did not charge the migrants a down payment at the outset of the trip, this meant a group of five migrants implied up to a \$200 investment up front by Paco and his partner. In addition to that, they rented a house in Brownsville to house the migrants for a day or two at a time before making the trip past the immigration checkpoints and north to Houston. While at the house, they would call migrants’ relatives in Houston to make sure that each migrant had someone who was going to pay their \$600 fee to be taken there.

Getting migrants through the ranch country of South Texas past the immigration checkpoints on the highways leading north towards Houston was the biggest challenge facing Paco and his partner. The routes they used varied depending upon the activities of the Border Patrol in the sector. One of their preferred strategies was to leave Brownsville at 5:00 AM and drive two and a half hours north and west on U.S. 83 to Zapata, Texas, at the north end of Falcon Reservoir, still on the border (see Map 2 on page 4). There they would turn north on Texas Highway 16. By 8:00 AM, they would drop off the group of migrants with a guide, who would lead them through the brush around the Border Patrol checkpoint near Hebronville, Texas. It was important to get the migrants into the brush and start walking before 8:00 AM because from that hour forward Border Patrol agents would be circulating in the area. The migrants and guide would carry gallon jugs of water and food like crackers and canned tuna fish.⁴ Each person was required to carry his own food. Although the group would actually walk no more than a total of ten hours or so, they would hide in the brush much of the time during the daylight hours, so that if they began their trek at 7:00 AM they often would not reach their destination on the highway beyond the checkpoint until nightfall the next day. There a car would be waiting for

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them and they would drive gravel back roads through the ranch country towards Robstown on U.S. 77 just outside of Corpus Christi. Once they reached Robstown, they were unlikely to be stopped by the Border Patrol or the Texas highway patrol and would continue untroubled on to Houston. They did, however, have a strategy for avoiding getting pulled over with a carful of migrants

PACO: The way we did it was we'd have my partner drive the car with the people in it. Then I'd drive in my pick-up a ways behind him. Or ahead, guiding him. The reason I'd drive ahead of him is that normally around Corpus, at around nine at night, there would be DPS⁵ there. And if there were some DPS there, I'd speed ahead.

SPENER: DPS, not the Border Patrol?

PACO: No, not the Border Patrol. We were real lucky. It was really unusual for the Border Patrol to stop us. What we normally did was I would go in my pick-up and if the speed limit was 60 m.p.h., I'd speed up to 80 or 85 to be sure they wouldn't stop him. So paying a ticket was just par for the course for us.

SPENER: So you would try to distract them.

PACO: Right, I'd distract them. So when one of us would see one of those DPS cars, I'd just accelerate. When they'd pull me over, the other car full of migrants would keep going. There were only two occasions that I remember the DPS pulled over our car full of people. One time they took the car and left us the people! The other time they pulled us over in Victoria and sent everyone back.

Upon arrival, they would go to the apartment of one of their accomplices and call the friends and relatives of the migrants who had agreed to pay for their passage. In those days, if they arrived with five migrants, they would collect around \$3,000 in fees. After a period of time earning this amount of money and getting used to working together, they began to move up to 15 migrants at a time using a double-cabin pick-up truck, with seven people in the cab and the rest under a tarp in the bed of the truck. Thus, they could collect as much as \$9,000 in fees for a single trip. By this time, Paco had abandoned any thoughts he had had about finding a regular job in Brownsville and became a full-time, professional coyote

Paco worked with his partner for the next three years. Theirs was a small organization, though "organization" may be too strong a term. In

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reality, only he and his partner really worked together directly and knew each other well. They relied upon “contacts” to recruit migrants at the bus station in Matamoros, to bring the migrants across the river, and to bring a vehicle across the river and leave it for them on the other side of the highway checkpoints. These contacts were not under their supervision, but rather were independent operators who provided them—and others—with a particular service they needed. Paco and his partner were not, he insists, a *gang*. Actually, they preferred to not to work too closely with others out of a desire to keep their activities clandestine:

Spener: So, you weren’t a gang, then.

Paco: No.

Spener: Rather, you were just two people who had their contacts.

Paco: Exactly. We were never a gang. It was just he and I and a lot of the time I even did all the work myself. ... Because a lot of the time we didn’t want to get anyone else involved. If the person that normally helped us couldn’t, then we didn’t want to get other people involved because in Brownsville a lot of people, I don’t know why, will denounce you [to the police] for any reason.

The complete enterprise run by Paco and his partner consisted of just a few roles. I discussed with Paco the terminology for talking about who did what in a coyotaje enterprise like his, starting with the *caminador* [literally “the one who walks someone else”], the guide who leads migrants through the brush on foot:

PACO: I use *caminador*, but people also say *guía* [guide] and *mula* [mule] to talk about this person.

SPENER: In your opinion, what is the difference between a *patero*, a *pollero*, and a *coyote*?

PACO: It’s all the same. It’s just a different way of seeing it. It’s the same. The crosser of the river, they just call *cruzador*⁶ Or *brincador*.⁷ And the coyote is the one who organizes everything.

SPENER: And what term is used the most, coyote, patero, or pollero?

PACO: Here in Matamoros, patero is used more than coyote. Pollero is hardly ever used. Patero is used more in Matamoros, in this region, in the Valley.⁸

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GOING INTO BUSINESS FOR HIMSELF

After three years in the coyotaje business, Paco began to have troubles with his partner. He was living in Brownsville and it was typically his partner who would travel with groups all the way to Houston and collect the money. On several occasions when Paco had helped him move a group of 15 persons out of Brownsville, the partner would claim that not all of the members of the group had paid him, or had given up walking in the brush, or had gotten away from him in Houston. This seemed to be occurring with increasing frequency, so Paco decided to go out on his own.

PACO: I split with him because of money. I wasn't living in Houston. I was living in Brownsville. So he was the one who would collect the money and when he would get back, could never account for all of it. Somebody had always escaped or there was someone who hadn't paid him in full. I think he did that about four times in the two years that we worked together. Then I concluded that it was no longer in my interest to work with him.

SPENER: You felt ...

PACO: Like I was robbed! Once he said that seven of the fifteen people we were bringing had run off without paying him. He lied!

By this time the Border Patrol had launched Operation Rio Grande (ORG) in its Rio Grande Valley Sector,⁹ a large scale attempt to deter unauthorized crossings by concentrating agents and surveillance equipment along the river immediately up and downstream from Brownsville-Matamoros in 1997 and then in Hidalgo-Reynosa and Laredo-Nuevo Laredo in 1998. According to Paco, ORG did not have a substantial impact on his activities as a coyote. He was able to find a new person to bring his migrants across the river near Boca Chica, the mouth of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo del Norte:

Operation Rio Grande didn't affect us. ... It didn't affect us because we'd met a man who crossed people for us by way of the beach. Through Boca Chica, what they call "La bocana." ... I never did find out how he did it. All we'd do is deliver the people to him in Matamoros and he would come and deliver them to us at our house in Brownsville. We worked like that for a couple of years. And we never had any problems with him. It was real expensive, though. We paid as much as \$250 per person. But if you work it out, it was better for me in the long run. Because [before] I was paying about \$120 just to have someone take them across the river for me. But then I had to pay someone else to take them to the river in Matamoros and to pick them up and bring them to me once they were across. So it was already coming out at about

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\$200. And with this person, I just told him that [the migrants] would be in such and such a hotel or in such and such a house. He'd go get them and the next day I'd have them in Brownsville. And I would just ask the people, "Hey, how did you get across?" And they would say, "They took us across at La Boca, they picked us up in a car, they dropped us off before the checkpoint, we walked around the checkpoint and into the port,¹⁰ and he picked us up."

Aside from this change in route and hiring a new *brincador* who used a somewhat different place to cross the river, little changed about how Paco conducted his coyotaje enterprise after ORG was launched. The basics of the business remained the same, although now it made more sense for him to live at least part-time in Houston, to make it easier to collect money at the end of each trip. At the height of his business at the turn of the century, he was making two trips from Brownsville to Houston each month, transporting about 15 migrants each trip and charging each migrant about \$1,000. He continued to work with no more than four other accomplices, one to receive migrants in Matamoros, one to bring them across the river into Brownsville, one who left the car at the appointed point just north of the highway checkpoint, and one to walk them through the brush and drive to Houston. Indeed, his work actually got easier to the extent that more and more of his business was from return customers or migrants to whom he had been recommended, thus obviating the need to rely on (and pay) enganchadores at the bus terminal. He estimates that his total costs per trip came to about \$5,000, leaving \$10,000 left over for him alone. It was a very lucrative venture. By the time he got out of the coyotaje business in early 2002, he was charging \$1,400 per person for the trip from Matamoros to Houston.

Houston is not only a major destination for Mexican and Central American immigrants to the United States. It is also a major migration crossroads, as thousands of migrants coming from Mexico make connections there to continue on to other points in the eastern half of the United States, especially Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas, states that grew to prominence as destinations for new labor migrants during the 1990s. The city is home to dozens of above-ground transportation companies catering to immigrants (e.g., Los Primos de Atlanta, a bus company specializing in connections to the Southeastern states) as well as an unknown number of underground transportation services providers known colloquially as *raiteros*.¹¹ Paco did not deal directly with the *raiteros* himself. Rather, one of his associates—the guide and driver—knew a half-dozen *raiteros* he could call to pick migrants up once they were in Houston.

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Just as the *enganchadores* of the Matamoros bus station “sold” migrants to Paco and his associates, so did Paco’s driver “sell” migrants to the raiteros for about \$50 each. Of course, the migrants were not literally being bought and sold. Rather, the \$50 received by Paco’s driver constituted something more akin to a referral fee paid to him by one of the many raiteros competing to transport migrants out of Houston to other destinations around the country. In principle, Paco could have collected this money himself, but he allowed his driver to “earn” this occasional extra money as something of a “bonus.”

TREKKING THROUGH THE BRUSH

For migrants and coyotes alike, trekking through the brush around the Border Patrol checkpoints is the most physically challenging and potentially dangerous part of the journey from Matamoros to Houston. When his partner Juan brought him into the business, Paco walked through the brush several times with him, leading a half dozen migrants around the checkpoint. He said it was not difficult to learn the routes and, in any case, it was mainly a matter of learning to use a compass to chart the course.

El caminador, that is, the one who walks the migrants through the brush, doesn’t start out knowing how to do it. But anyone can do it because, like my friend taught me, down there they walk using a compass. So you leave the caminador in the brush and he takes the compass from you and he’s going to walk them through. They used to walk seven degrees to the north. So he’s just following the pattern of seven degrees to the north, seven degrees to the north. In other words, he didn’t necessarily have to be a caminador [already]. He became one there. ... Once I had someone in a group [of migrants] in Matamoros that I’d decided would be the caminador without even telling him ahead of time. Without him even realizing it. I put him in a van, I was bringing him as an illegal and I even lowered his fee. And he had that trip to learn and afterwards he came to be one of my workers.

Walking through the brush was physically tough, however, especially for people who weren’t experienced hikers.¹² Paco himself didn’t do well as a caminador and left that particular task to other accomplices after he went into business for himself. The first time Juan took him through the brush, they trekked “only” nine hours, but Paco was not a hiker, was not accustomed to having to carry a knapsack with food and water, and was wearing cowboy boots that were not meant for walking. After spending a sleepless night in a steady rain with no shelter aside from plastic trash bags, he became so exhausted hiking the next day that other members of the group had to help him along, carrying him at times.

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It rained all night, and we couldn't do anything, we were staying in an area where there weren't even any trees, it was just big bushes. All we had were plastic bags to put over us. And it wasn't drizzling, it was a constant rain. That day I woke up at around two in the morning. I was sitting there, just smoking and smoking, it was my first time to smoke! And at around seven in the morning, [Juan, his partner] wakes everyone up and it's "let's go!" We walked for about an hour and I really couldn't do it, my legs were all scratched up. And I always wore these big boots, and by then I couldn't go on even with all my soul. I was so tired, I just had never hiked like that! And I won't lie to you, they helped me along for a couple of hours. Even the girls helped me! So after that, I really didn't want to do the trek anymore. I just didn't want to do it. What happens is that we used to have a lot of women with us and the caminador was afraid that one or two of them would fall behind and he wouldn't have anyone to help them. You got me? That was the problem. He didn't want to guide them alone and we didn't want to involve anyone else [in our group of accomplices]. That was our fear.

In spite of the introduction by the Border Patrol in the late 1990s of a biometric database known as IDENT, into which photographs and fingerprints of all migrants that they apprehended were entered, guides known as caminadores were seldom prosecuted as coyotes. The reason for this, Paco explained, was that few groups were actually apprehended in the brush away from the river:

PACO: In the five years I worked on my own, I only had one caminador. No one else.

SPENER: Was he apprehended very many times by the Border Patrol?

PACO: No, only at the river.

SPENER: I don't understand.

PACO: Yes, he got caught, but only when I would be gone for a while and he would go to work leading people across for other Matamoros coyotes.

SPENER: You mean he didn't work exclusively for you.

PACO: No, he did work exclusively for me. When I needed him he dropped everything else he was doing. But he would call me and say, hey, when are you going to come? And I would tell him not until next week. And then he'd go look to make some money elsewhere. So, most of the time when they caught him, it was on

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other jobs. I'd say that they only caught him working for us two times at most.

SPENER: So the migra didn't figure out that he was a coyote?

PACO: No, because at the river, normally everyone runs and no one knows who the coyote is. It's not the same as in the brush where the guide is at the head of the group. They never caught him in the *monte*.

Needless to say, not all migrants were up to this kind of arduous trek. Paco said the best migrants to work with were the Mexican *rancheros*¹³ because they were tough and up to making the trek. Moreover, they didn't complain about anything. He felt that in general, Mexican clients were preferable to Central Americans, with whom he and his accomplices had more difficulties, including in making the trek.

Spener: Who is your preferred client? What is the profile of the perfect client from the coyote's point of view?

Paco: The Mexican is the perfect client because he pays. You don't have to work so hard to get paid. The Mexican, if he doesn't have the money, he doesn't come. With the Central American, there are times that he comes and he's going to ask one person to pay for him, and then he's going to ask another person. The perfect client is the Mexican. Every Mexican pays without problems.

Spener: And among the Mexicans, what type of person is the best to cross?

Paco: The best ones at making the crossing are the *rancheros*, the guys from the rancho, because they're good for walking. They're real strong, you don't have any trouble with them. Sometimes they even do it wearing boots, cowboy boots. Or they'll hike through the *monte* wearing *huaraches* [rustic leather sandals] the *michoacanos* [people from the state of Michoacán]. And they don't complain about *anything*.

Spener: They're tough men.

Paco: But not the Central American. They're no good at walking! They whine about everything and there are a lot of hassles. Sometimes you have to lie to the Central American. "You know what, how much are we going to walk? Only four or five hours." When in reality you're going to walk nine. But once they're there, they have to walk those nine hours! Those little white lies [*mentiras piadosas*], like they say.

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In some areas, such as around Laredo, the trek would be even longer, as much as two full days.

The strenuous nature of the trek and the “little white lies” that Paco and his associates would tell migrants about exactly how far they would have to walk raises the issue of what happened to people who couldn’t keep up with their guides in the brush. Tales abound among migrants and Border Patrol agents of migrants being abandoned by their coyotes, sometimes to die. Paco maintained that over the years his *caminadores* had in fact, left migrants behind, but that no one had ever really been abandoned, nor had anyone died. Part of the explanation was that the South Texas brush country was not as unforgiving as the open Arizona desert further west: there was vegetation, there were ranch houses, windmills and water pumps, and roads crisscrossing the areas through which they trekked. That meant that it was possible to leave someone who couldn’t keep up in a place where they could soon be “rescued” by the Border Patrol:

Spener: Did you ever lose anyone out in the brush? You hear that a lot. A lot of times they say that the coyote abandons them.

Paco: Yes. Thanks to God, we never had anyone die on us en route. That would be because of our way of working. But what you say about a lot of people being left behind in the brush, yes, it’s true, but normally what the guide would do is leave them on ranches so that the Border Patrol would pick them up. But he wouldn’t *want* to leave them behind, it was because they wouldn’t want to continue, they would tire out. You know what I mean? And yes, I would say that during all those years, just to give a figure, 40 or 50 gave up. Out of tiredness.

Spener: Where would you leave them?

Paco: Near a ranch [house or entrance]. Then the only thing the guide would do is ask that they give the group two or three hours’ head start so they wouldn’t get tracked down [by the Border Patrol]. That they’d give the group three hours before going to seek help. In fact, I’d say that a good percentage, around 50 percent of these people would return to Matamoros and would want to come across again. From experience, I know that they got back safely. Obviously, the Border Patrol picked them up. But they had to think about it because if you couldn’t make it the first time, you’re not going to be able to make the second time, either. But fortunately we never had anyone die on us, thanks to God nothing like that ever happened to us.¹⁴

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By “our way of working,” Paco meant that not only were the activities among his accomplices well-coordinated, but that also that the caminador was trained to use a compass so as not to get lost, everyone carried food and water on the trek, and that water could be found en route if they ran out. Paco also spoke of one of the other principal dangers of the South Texas brush country: rattlesnakes. To deal with this hazard, the caminadores would carry sticks to beat back the snakes they encountered on the trail. Also, when the group would sleep at night, the caminadores would fill plastic trash bags with stones and array them in a circle around the sleeping migrants. Paco claimed that this would keep rattlers from slithering over to sleeping migrants and coyotes during the night. In my interview with him, Paco did not mention whether any migrants in his care had ever been bitten by a rattlesnake, though other interviews I have conducted with migrants and Border Patrol agents have indicated that snakebite in the brush occurs with disturbing frequency.¹⁵

RELATIONS WITH CLIENTS

Paco claimed to have had a good reputation as a coyote. After a while in the business, most of the migrants he transported were either return customers or people who had been recommended to him by migrants who had traveled with him previously. Part of the reason for his popularity was that he did not charge migrants anything up front: His was an entirely C.O.D. business. In addition, he would negotiate discounts with migrants who brought him new customers, up to \$50 a person, so, for example, if a return customer came back with four of his friends, the group would pay \$250 less.¹⁶ With some “recommended” migrants, he would actually allow them to repay him over a period of weeks after arriving in Houston. One of the advantages of working mainly with “recommended” clients is that they would contact him directly and he could avoid dealing with the enganchadores in the Matamoros bus station. Not only did this save him money, it also helped him keep a lower profile in Matamoros.¹⁷

Paco and his associates typically did not have problems with clients or with other coyotes. They did not feel the need to carry weapons of any kind, aside from the sticks they carried in the brush to ward off rattlesnakes. Migrants generally were cooperative and did what they were told. If they had clients that they thought might create problems for them, they tried to screen them out in Matamoros or Brownsville before beginning the journey north to Houston. He remembered one case in particular where he and his partner refused to take two migrants beyond Brownsville:

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Paco: Several times we left people in Brownsville. Once two brothers came along. They were from Guadalajara but they'd been deported from Los Angeles. And normally, you try to reason with people, but these two were *cholos* [gang-bangers]. This was when I was still working with my partner. So, seeing how they looked and how they didn't want to give us a phone number to call [in Houston], and they even yelled at my partner, so we just decided to leave them [in Brownsville]. We knew they were going to cause problems. I'd say we did this about 20 times over the years, leave somebody who was problematic to save us trouble later.

Spener: So it was better not to take them.

Paco: Exactly, that was our policy. Not to take people who were going to cause us problems.

Relations with migrants could be more problematic upon arriving in Houston. Once they arrived, migrants would occasionally attempt to leave without paying or wouldn't be able to come up with the agreed upon payment for the trip. Paco's policy in this case, somewhat surprisingly, was to let migrants go if they couldn't or wouldn't pay. He did not like doing this, obviously, but felt it was in his own interest to do so:

Paco: Look, people normally behaved well. Where they would start behaving badly was when they would arrive [in Houston]. Once they were here, they felt, they would try to escape. They wouldn't want to pay you.

Spener: What did you do to get them to pay you?

Paco: I really think that God helped us. Because we always had a policy that no one taught us or anything, but any time we'd get into a dispute with anyone, what we'd do is let them go. Just like that. We'd lose the money. Why? Because of the experiences of

other coyotes. If you clamp down on them it can bring you problems with the police or even with the migrant's family members.

Paco related to me a particular anecdote in which he had allowed three brothers from Puebla to leave without paying him:

On one occasion we had to let three brothers go. They were from Puebla. I remember them well because one of them was gay and he called me about six months ago, at my sister's house, since I change cell phones all the time. When he got here, his uncle was in Miami and I called him personally and he said, right, there's

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not problem. That was in 2000, when we were charging \$1,000. It was \$3,000 for the three of them. And he said, no problem, I'll wire you the money when you get them to Houston. When we got here, the man didn't come through with the money. So, one of the boys I worked with was a big talker and he tried to scare the guys. He said, you know what? You are going back [to Mexico]. Then the gay brother began to cry and he phoned me and said, give us a chance, and all that, they were going to pay us. And first of all, you feel bad because, in this case we were bringing around ten people, so you're losing like 30 percent. That hurts! So I decided, since I was working on my own by then, okay, I was going to let them go. And, in fact, they did eventually pay me. I don't think that will happen to anyone ever again: That he let someone go and they come back to pay him.

Other coyotes would hold migrants forcibly until they paid or even beat or torture them into paying:

Spener: So that would happen [in Houston], they'd hold people?

Paco: Well, other people would do it. Me, I never tried because I know the consequences, I know the laws here. So I'd rather lose the money.

Spener: But among your acquaintances, coyotes, there were people who'd do that?

Paco: I have friend, a close friend, who is in jail because there was a person who didn't want to pay them and they beat him and he died. This happened here in Houston. ... He and another guy kicked and beat him, and it got out of hand, they'd been drinking, and the guy died. They arrested the two of them plus the lady coyote they worked for, they even arrested the kid who'd ferried them across the river, the whole band.

Spener: So, there are reasons for behaving well.

Paco: Right. I say that you're risking a lot to earn a thousand or two thousand pesos more. That's why I'd rather lose the money, to avoid problems. And so far, it's worked for me, I've never had a problem fighting with anyone's relative or with the police, thank God.

Although these types of "policies" on Paco's part may have made him a "good" coyote in the minds of his clients (and in his own conscience), he wondered aloud to me if he might better be described as a "dumb" coyote: "I lost a lot of money and made a lot less than I could have."

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OTHER COYOTES

Like the immigration authorities and most other migrants I have interviewed, Paco had a dim view of coyotes in general. According to him, most of them were fellow Mexican nationals who had gotten into the business because of the easy money and did not have migrants' well-being at heart. Some coyotes would demand migrants' money up front, take them across the river, and then abandon them there to be apprehended by the Border Patrol. Others could be violent and abusive, roughing up migrants to intimidate them. Paco said he knew some coyotes who did this as a matter of course, and advised him to do so as well, to ensure migrants' submissiveness.

They'd tell me, "Don't be stupid!" They'd say you have to scare them. Lock them up in rooms, kind of like kidnapping them. Because that's what they would do. That's why I say that I think that God helped me for so long. It's not that I was a good guy. It's illegal. But I've spent a lot of time reading the Bible and I think, maybe in order to make myself feel a little better, that at the same time I was helping people. By breaking the law, of course.

Many coyotes drink and do drugs. Paco recruited his workers through friends in Matamoros and tried to avoid hiring drug-users and drunkards, whom he regarded as untrustworthy and unreliable, especially leading migrants through the brush:

Look, all this business of easy money, drugs, and liquor, means the majority of coyotes are drug addicts and drink. That's why I always tried to be sure not to work with anyone who did drugs. Why? Because a lot of people take drugs to get their nerve up. And how can you expect someone who is drugged-up to guide people through the brush? But I know a lot of people who do that. So I try to take care. Everything you do right, will benefit you in the end and everything you do wrong, is going to hold you back. That's why I say stay away from drunks and people who do drugs. It's a problem. They'll keep you from making any money.

Although many coyotes that Paco knew used drugs, most people who guided and transported migrants did not also move narcotics. They were largely separate businesses and he knew of few cases where an organization would simultaneously transport drugs and migrants.¹⁸ He himself had never transported narcotics because, aside from any moral questions, he was aware that the penalties for drug trafficking were much more severe than for "alien smuggling." Nonetheless, Paco was familiar with coyotes who had "moved up" into the business of trafficking drugs,

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leaving behind the more complicated arrangements involved in moving people.

Spener: In your experience do these two businesses mix together much?

Paco: Well, not most people. What I've seen is that the coyote will move up [to drug trafficking]. He doesn't combine them, he moves up. I've had a lot of friends who went from being coyotes to being drug dealers. A lot of them.

Spener: They stop being a coyote and become a drug dealer.

Paco: Most of them.

Spener: So, how do they move up?

Paco: Well, they get the money together.

Spener: To buy marijuana?

Paco: Exactly. And since they know how, they have their way of working, it's easy for them, it's just making the investment. I really never wanted to do that because I've always known that for *indocumentados* it's one sentence, and for drugs it's another. I know the laws here and the penalties can't be compared. So thank God up until now the devil has never tempted me, I've never done drugs nor have I moved them. And I hope I never have to go back to [working as a coyote].

Spener: And are there any coyotes who take advantage of migrants by crossing drugs with them?

Paco: In my experiences, I've never heard of it. I've heard on television and all that, but not in my experiences.

Spener: It's a separate business.

Paco: Yes, it's a separate business. Maybe some of my coyote friends are doing that, but if they do it's real hush-hush [*lo harán muy calladamente*].

On the other hand, one of the men who worked with Paco as a *cruzador*, leading migrants across the river, had been arrested at the river once for crossing marijuana. Nonetheless, this had not happened while the man was crossing migrants for Paco. Rather, Paco explained that sometimes there were lulls in his business and that when his accomplices weren't working for him and needed money (they were as bad at saving as he was), they

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would sometimes accept offers of work from other coyotes or, in the case of this man who worked the river, drug traffickers.

SPENER: Did any worker of yours ever get prosecuted?

PACO: Only one. But they didn't catch him with me. They caught him bringing marijuana across. But that was a different dance [*fue otro baile*]. He worked for me, but what happened was that I would pay him, right, and he would disappear in Matamoros for up to a month. Or he'd get his money and he'd go to visit his wife's family in Florida. I guess he had just as hard a time holding onto money as I did. So there were times when he didn't have any money and I wouldn't have any work for him, and he'd have to go out and find something. And on that occasion they caught him and gave him five years for bringing marijuana across.

Thus, to the extent that members of an "organization" like his were really independent contractors, it was possible for given individuals to be engaged in both drug and coyotaje even though the businesses were set up separately and headed by different leaders.

Regardless of whether coyotes were typically involved in the drug trade as well as transporting migrants, Paco believed that most coyotes cared little about their customers except as a way of making easy money. The typical coyote, he said, was always looking out for number one. At the same time, Paco recognized the moral complexity of the situation, insofar as coyotes driven mainly by greed could still provide a service to migrants that was vitally important to them:

SPENER: And regarding the coyote in general, what is your opinion of the role that he plays in this whole process?

PACO: Well, in general, the coyote is out for himself. I think that treating people badly or treating them well is beside the point. What they want is to bring people, collect their fee, and go back and spend their money. The coyote in general is out for himself [*es puro beneficio propio*]. It's the same in moral terms. What the coyote wants is to satisfy his own ego. And a lot of the time they do it just for the satisfaction of fooling *la migra*, not so much for the money anymore. I know ten coyotes in Matamoros who have more money than they know what to do with. Because they've gone into other [legitimate] businesses and all that. In general, personal participation of the coyote is more about making money than about helping anyone.

SPENER: Does the selfish coyote also help the migrant?

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PACO: I don't think so. I think that the selfish coyote is a *ratero* [thief], like they say. He's the one that gets you across the river to Brownsville, takes half your money, and then it's "See you!" He's not going to see you again. He's stolen your money and left you to fend for yourself in Brownsville. But what are you going to do?

SPENER: Do you believe they still help people get where they want to go even if they do it purely ...

PACO: Well, yes. In part, it is a kind of a help, but I tell you that first he satisfies himself economically and then everything else is secondary. But in part, well, we all help them because we help them get here. And it's a risk because in the end they just send the immigrant back to Mexico and the coyote is the one that goes to jail. In other words the compensation in money also has its risks. But, in part, I think that we help them make it to their destination, to do whatever it is they are trying to do.

At the same time, Paco resented coyotes being blamed for many of the problems associated with undocumented immigration to the United States. In explaining his views, he argued that coyotes were responsible for only one small part of the migration process, one that was not necessarily related to the other problems and controversies that the arrival of so many undocumented Mexicans to the United States generated:

PACO: And if once they're here they behave well or badly, if they make money or not, if they get killed or if they live, that depends on the immigrant. In other words, I believe that the coyote's job is over once they're here. Because U.S. policy places a lot of blame on the coyote because he brings good people and bad people. I think that everyone is going to get here anyway, whether I bring them or someone else brings them. If the person wants to make it, he's going to make it to the United States. One way or another. If they behave well or badly, that's their problem.

SPENER: So they shouldn't blame the coyote.

PACO: No, of course not, because what happens after they get here doesn't depend on us. Sure, we participate, of course. But then, when the people we bring do good, we should also get some credit. I know people that I brought for or five years ago that are U.S. citizens today. How they do it, I don't know. I have a neighbor here in Houston who is a U.S. citizen, and I brought him! It seems like he got married to someone. And I believe he is going to be a pastor in a church and all that. In other words, there are *pros* and *cons*.

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In spite of the low opinion Paco had of his fellow coyotes, he had not had any problems with rivals in the business in terms of confrontations, intimidation, having migrants being “stolen” from him by competitors, or being turned in to the authorities by another coyote. Moreover, he had not heard about these kinds of problems between other coyotes, although he noted that it was common among drug trafficking gangs. He would sometimes see other coyotes operating on the highway or in the brush but never had any problems with them.

Spener: So what’s it like when you bump into another coyote with another group on the trail?

Paco: Nothing special. They look at each other and go their separate ways. I’ve bumped into other coyotes lots of times on the highway.

Spener: And there aren’t fights between coyotes? Isn’t there competition among them to bring people across?

Paco: No! There are plenty [of migrants] to go around and I think that if there were fights it would be useless because one would finger the other [to the authorities], and so no, really there aren’t. Everything normal and each one minds his own business. Well, maybe there is some jealousy, that you’ve gotten more [migrants], or something like that, but there’s nothing you can do about it.

There has been a great deal of reporting in the press that the coyotaje business has been taken over by large-scale syndicates that had effectively driven small-scale, “mom & pop” operators like Paco out of business. Paco did not believe this and insisted that nobody had muscled him out of the business or forced him to work for/with them if he wanted to continue to work as a coyote. According to Paco, no single group or small set of groups monopolized the transportation of migrants across the border. At the same time, he had had problems dealing with corrupt authorities in Matamoros. The men who recruited migrants at the bus station in Matamoros had to pay off police authorities—through the local mafia—to continue to operate there. These men, in turn, let the Matamoros mafia know to whom they were bringing groups of migrants to be crossed into the United States.

Paco was fingered in this way about two years after he had gone into business for himself and was stopped by the policía federal in Matamoros with a load of migrants in two vehicles. The police seized his vehicles and he was only able to recover them when he agreed to pay a monthly “cuota” of \$1,000. He paid this fee through an intermediary to a local mafioso and

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after that never had a problem. He was given a “code” to give to any government authority that stopped him with migrants —whether it was the the *policía judicial*, *gobernación*, or *migración* and he would be left alone. Later the *cuota* was raised to \$2,000 and finally to \$3,000 around the time he quit the business in early 2002. He did not like paying it, but said he had no choice but to pay it if he wanted to stay and business and stay out of jail:

PACO: Over there, what the mafia says, that’s what is done. Over there, you can’t do anything about it. Whatever they say, goes, because if you don’t do it, they won’t let you work. In fact, I know a person that they threw in jail because he wouldn’t pay. They planted drugs on him and everything and they gave him seven years in jail in Mexico. So you can’t do anything. You just have to do whatever they say.

SPENER: So once they’ve identified you, you can’t resist.

PACO: Not after that.

In fact, Paco said that on occasions the police would “sell” him migrants that they had “confiscated” from other coyotes that had failed to pay them off:

PACO: There were several occasions when the federales themselves sold me people that they’d taken away from other coyotes. They would come and sell them to me.

SPENER: They would take them away because they didn’t pay?

PACO: Because they didn’t pay their *cuota*. So, they would come to me and say, guess what? They called me and said we’ve got so many for you. And they always wanted to overcharge me, but I had to buy them from them because you really have no choice.

Nevertheless, Paco noted that he had worked in Matamoros for two full years before having to pay-off the mafia/authorities and that he believed it would have been quite possible for him to operate there without being detected if he had avoided recruiting migrants at the bus station.

Spener: Would it be possible to work as a coyote in Matamoros without having to pay [the mafia/authorities]?

Paco: Sure, I worked almost two years without paying, after I went out on my own.

Spener: So, if you didn’t have to buy people from the enganchadores you wouldn’t have to pay off the authorities?

Paco: Exactly. Yes, it’s possible. I worked almost two years without any problems. Up until they fingered me.

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Paco's account of having to pay-off the authorities in Matamoros also clarifies that the authorities were not directly running the coyotaje business but rather that they were allowing multiple coyotes to operate in the city as long as they cut the authorities in on some of their profits. According to Paco, coyotes who paid the cuota could operate with impunity throughout the city.

Spener: So, there's no monopoly on crossing people?

Paco: Not really, but ...

Spener: But a lot of people work at that ...

Paco: Yes, a lot of people don't pay, but I think it's better to pay if you can, because then nobody bothers you.

Spener: But, there's no gang that says, "Look, you cross with us or you don't cross"?

Paco: No.

Spener: In other words, there's competition in that sense.

Paco: Listen, there's no problem, if you pay you can do practically anything you want. There's plenty of room along the river.

Paco and his accomplices did no recruiting in migrant-sending communities in the Mexican interior or in Central America, nor did they collaborate with other organizations that did so. A substantial proportion of his clients, perhaps the majority, were from Central America, especially El Salvador and Honduras. These migrants were taken through Mexico by other organizations, often in tractor-trailers and tank-trucks [*pipas*], and would contact him when they arrived at the border. He did not "buy" loads of Central Americans from the organizations that snuck them through Mexico, rather they or their relatives in the U.S. would contact them once they reached the border and he would pick them up at a hotel. He said he had heard horror stories about how the Central Americans suffered as they were taken through Mexico and paid outlandish sums of money even as they were mistreated. Although the same organizations that transported these migrants through Mexico could also arrange to transport them into the United States, he said that some Central American migrants had figured out that it could be cheaper for them to get to the U.S. border and then cross with him than to pay the same organization that had brought them through Mexico to complete the trip into the United States as well.

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Paco: Most of them came that way, in tank trucks. But since they charged them a lot of money, paid in Mexico, it was more economical for them to pay me to get them over here than to pay [that group of coyotes] for the whole trip.

Spener: The same group?

Paco: Precisely. So they paid to be brought to Matamoros and there they split off from the big group because they knew how to do this from the experiences of other relatives. They used to tell me, often, "My cousin went in a truck and it was bad and he really suffered." But in Mexico, there aren't many alternatives to doing it that way. I believe these people suffer more getting across Mexico than getting into the United States. That's what I think.

Given Paco's dim view of coyotes in general and the dangers they could pose to migrants, I asked him if there were anything migrants could do to improve their chances of safe passage and good treatment. The main thing, he said, was to try to avoid coyotes who wanted money up front. It also helped to go to a coyote who had been recommended by a fellow migrant:

Spener: What would be your advice to the migrant arriving at the border who's looking for someone to cross him into the United States? What should he know and what should he do to get across safe and sound and not have to pay too much money?

Paco: To choose a good coyote, there's no special trick or anything like that. The only thing I'd say is that the coyote who starts asking you for money in Matamoros is up to no good. He wants something. If you find someone who'll take you without asking for money up front, go with him. Yes, there are lots who will do that. So if the first coyote starts asking for money in Matamoros or in Brownsville, something smells bad. Why? Because sometimes they don't have any money! It's happened to me! At times, I didn't even have money to make the trip. Why? Because problems come up. Once one of my wife's relatives needed like \$15,000 and we had to put it up for her. We were left practically broke. So many times [the coyote] has to ask for money up front. But I think that a good coyote ought to have resources, \$2,000 or \$3,000 to make the trip. But I think that someone who starts asking for money in Matamoros, that's already a bad sign. In my experience it's the sign you should turn around and run from him.

Spener: Many migrants have told me that they always try to minimize the risk by going with a coyote that's been recommended.

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Paco: Exactly.

Spener: They've told me that in a certain way, although there's never any guarantee, that, yes, there are some that have better reputations than others.

Paco: That's why I say that one acquires a reputation by bringing people. In my case, about 80 percent of my clients recommended me to others. Why? Because they got fed, I treated them well.

Spener: And did you bring the same people more than once, at times?

Paco: Yes, a lot of people, a lot of people would come back the next year. Most Mexicans, since they like to go home for the holidays in Mexico, Christmas, New Year's, and there in January, the middle of January or in February, they're calling me. "Guess what? Here I am!"

HE SHOULD BE A RICH MAN TODAY

Paco never intended to be in the business of coyotaje as long as he was, a total of seven years. Indeed, getting into the business was never a planned thing in the first place. He needed money and the opportunity presented itself:

I was 26 years old when I started and I never thought, I only thought about the problems I had [at that moment]. I didn't have enough money even to pay the rent, so I got into it for two or three months and then I saw it was easy money, and there you have it. And then I was in the business for seven years and thank God, I hope I never have to go back to it, because of my kids, and even more because I wouldn't want to wind up in jail.

Having had earnings of as much as \$200,000 a year for several years running, Paco had little to show for it when I interviewed him in his small apartment in a run-down complex in Houston that was inhabited mainly by fellow Mexican immigrants. His wife was at work at a store in a nearby strip mall and he was left at home to care for his three small children, who wrestled with each other, demanded snacks and drinks, and climbed all over him throughout the interview. He was rueful about his present economic situation:

Paco: The deal is that I always spent everything I had. I spent *a lot* of money. Sometimes I even spent more than I had. It wasn't because I was a drug addict or anything like that. I've never done drugs, I have a cigarette every once in a while, and barely drink, either! But if you're talking about clothes, going to Las Vegas, or

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to a casino in Louisiana, that's why I don't have what I really ought to have today. ... Really there's no explanation. I ought to have practically a small fortune.

Spener: Yeah, that's \$200,000 a year for six years.

Paco: Yeah, it's a lot of money. And really, I do have two or three cars, but it really doesn't reflect anything.

Spener: Do you own your own house?

Paco: No. Well, yes, in Mexico, but not here.

Spener: In Matamoros?

Paco: In Matamoros.

Paco's interactions with fellow coyotes over the years suggested that many others have fallen into the same trap of frittering away the money they made transporting migrants on purchases of ostentatious consumer goods.¹⁹

Spener: What are the relations like among coyotes? Is there a lot of competition? Are there confrontations? Are there friendships?

Paco: No, I'd say it's a phony friendship [*una amistad hipócrita*]. Look, a big percentage of coyotes, the majority, are Mexicans. I'm not calling them "Mexicans" because I'm from here, I consider myself to be Mexican, but I'm referring to people from Michoacán, from Guerrero, the majority are from there. When we would see each other in Brownsville, there were two or three places where they liked to go out to eat, and many times when I needed something from a friend, I went there, too. What I saw was everyone looking at everyone else, it was all for show, hey, 'I just bought this truck, I have this bracelet, I have this chain.' That's what the interaction is like among coyotes: Show off what they have. And I don't know if you've noticed in all that you've studied, that people from Michoacán like to wear jewelry, rings, expensive boots, expensive hats.

GETTING OUT OF THE BUSINESS

Paco left the business of coyotaje a little more than six months before the time of my interview with him in September 2002. There were several reasons for his decision to quit. One was a new business opportunity in Matamoros: He was going to set up a small maquiladora that would sew women's bathing suits from pieces sent to him from a relative in Los

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Angeles, who would also put up much of the money for getting started. Second, the authorities he had to pay off in Matamoros had raised their cuota to \$3,000 a month, a sum that Paco found burdensome.

SPENER: So, until the moment you got out of the business, you had to pay them off.

PACO: And that was one of the things that most discouraged me. One of the biggest things. Toward the end of 2001, the guy who always collected the money from me showed up and said, "The boss wants \$3,000 a month." I only paid it one time. Then I couldn't afford it any more. I spent two months putting off paying them. Then they sent him back to see me again. He says, "You know, they told me that either you quit working or when they catch you, they're going to put you in jail. Because you didn't pay, now you owe \$6,000. You have to pay it all." And that's how I quit. Because at that point it wasn't possible. Even after I quit I gave them \$2,000. Kind of a bonus, for what I owed them. Now, when I go to Matamoros, they leave me alone, I guess, because of those \$2,000. But they know, their people know I'm not working anymore.

Third, he was thinking about his young wife and three small children and what would happen to them if something happened to him, like getting sent to prison. In this regard, he was clear that he was not getting out of the business because the Border Patrol had made it too difficult to cross through the Lower Rio Grande Valley, but rather because he was concerned that the sentences being imposed for "harboring and transporting" migrants had gotten much more severe.

Spener: What has changed in recent years?

Paco: Really, what has changed are the penalties, not the operational part. It's the penalties they give! Since 9-11, I've met people that have gotten caught and before, for the first time, they gave you six months in jail. Now they give you up to two years for the first time! We're saying that it isn't so much the operational part, but rather it's the penalties that you can't face. ... And I know coyotes who've been at it for 15 or 20 years. But they've been in jail three or four times. And now it's harder because most of the coyotes are [non-citizen Legal Permanent Residents of the United States] and there are a lot of coyotes stuck in Mexico now because they don't have papers anymore. They get caught and they get deported. So it's gotten tough.

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At the same time, Paco believed that few coyotes had left the business because of harsher sentences, since they believed that they could still avoid getting caught by the authorities.

Spener: These longer sentences they're giving to the coyote, do they discourage him? Doesn't it influence him to quit the business?

Paco: In my case, a little bit. It wasn't the main reason. Sure, it discouraged me a little more. But I had already decided to get out. Moreover, my [relatives] had offered me this new business opportunity. So when I heard through the media that they were handing out harsher sentences, maybe 30 or 40 percent of my decision was based on that. ... But in general, it doesn't [discourage him] because the coyote always thinks that he's going to fool the migra, he's going to fool the law. That's what's always in his mind.

Indeed, Paco felt that the coyotaje business was still good in Matamoros and that there was still a lot of money to be made there. He felt certain that there were already two or three younger coyotes *con ganas* [gung-ho] who had replaced him, who were just like he was when he got into the business seven years earlier. Moreover, it was still a relatively easy business to get into. All you needed was someone to teach you and the will to do it.

Spener: What barriers are there to getting into the business today? What do you have to know?

Paco: The first thing you need is someone to teach you, more or less.

Spener: Teach you what?

Paco: Teach you how to work like my friend taught me. Where the migra sets up, the schedules, the river crossings, at what time to take off ...

Spener: Is it difficult to learn or is it easy?

Paco: It's hard if you don't have someone who'll take you along with him. I really got good schooling and I learned fast. And even today I could orient someone who came to me, but no one has so far.

Spener: And in terms of money and equipment and those kinds of things?

Paco: Well, really nothing, since I know people that didn't have any money and put together a trip getting the money from the

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[migrants]. They get a group of people together and tell them to send for money and right there they buy cars and all that. So I don't think this is an obstacle. The biggest obstacle, I think, is how bad you want it. Let go of your fear, since I was scared at first.

Getting a handful of people to work with you as a coyote was also fairly straightforward. Paco had always easily been able to recruit collaborators from among his friends and acquaintances in Matamoros:

SPENER: How do you recruit these people?

PACO: They're all from Matamoros.

SPENER: And are they friends or family members?

PACO: They're friends. Friends in need [amigos de la necesidad]. When you don't have any resources, you don't have work. But you do have the strength to work. You think, "Why not? *¿Por qué no le entro?* [Why don't I give it a shot?]."

THE FUTURE OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Paco had very definite ideas about the future of undocumented immigration across the border from Mexico into the United States. Like many other migrants and coyotes I interviewed, he did not believe the U.S. authorities would ever be able to put a stop to it. It wasn't so much that halting the flow was physically impossible, but rather that the U.S. government lacked the will to take the needed measures, which would bring about many undesired consequences in addition to stopping illegal immigration:

PACO: I think that the flow of immigrants is never going to stop. The only thing that can stop this would be in the way that they treat migrants once they're here. Like not being able to get an I.D. or not being able to have a bank account. In my personal opinion, the only way to stop the immigrant is with internal laws, so that the immigrant doesn't want to come. Why? Because he can't get I.D., because there are raids, and so forth. They're never going to be able to stop the immigrant at the border. It has to be based on laws here inside the country.

SPENER: And is there any way for *la migra* to shut down a business like yours?

PACO: We'll, I'd say not. Let's say that they catch the group that you're bringing today. But then you're bringing them back again

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tomorrow. The only way would be if they closed the border. I don't know. A wall or something like that. Because there's a lot of river to cover and try as hard as they might, there will always be a place to cross. The same thing with the checkpoint. The *monte* is immense! Huge! There's no way! Back when I was working with my friend on U.S. 77, they started putting up a checkpoint 15 miles north of Raymondville. So then people started walking from Raymondville. But then you can't put a checkpoint in the urban area because people will kill you. You know what I mean? Public opinion. So what the people would do is, if they used to walk twelve hours from Armstrong to Riviera, now they would walk twenty hours from Raymondville to Riviera.²⁰ And if they put something else up before Raymondville, they'll just start further back. People will figure out a way.

SPENER: So people don't give up.

PACO: No, clearly not. And the proof is that via San Antonio, they walk three or four nights. You know what I mean? That is never going to stop. I think that the law is the only thing that can stop this. Rejecting the immigrant with legal things. When the immigrant can't do anything here, when he can't work, get an I.D., make any money, he'll stay in his country. We haven't come to that point yet and I don't think we're going to, because here we've got the Constitution and all that.

Relatedly, Paco also had some advice for undocumented migrants arriving at the border in Matamoros in the first years of the new century:

My most important message to the immigrant would be that he pay attention to whom he should trust. I was a good coyote, but there are bad ones. But I would say that they should first try to make it in their own countries before coming here because things are getting tough here. If you don't have papers, you can't do anything here. Often even if you do have papers it's hard. So they should try to make it in their countries, find a way to do it there, act right. I don't know, try to do something good and leave coming here as a last resort. And if they do come here, be careful who you trust, look for someone who was recommended to you, a coyote that has brought other people you know, and then give it your all, but don't come here to cause problems. That's the message I would give them.

PACO'S MESSAGE TO GRINGO READERS

I asked Paco if he had a message he would like to give to *gringo* readers of his story. His answer was not especially eloquent, but expressed sentiments I often heard from Mexican migrants and coyotes alike:

Speaking to the American, to the gringo—I'm an American citizen but I consider myself to be Mexican—they should try not to reject the immigrant because I would say that 90 percent of immigrants come give it their best shot [*a echarle ganas*]. Sure, sometimes they take away a few jobs and all that, but the majority of Mexicans come to help out the country in a certain way because their labor is cheap. Yes, sometimes the Mexican drinks, and some commit felonies and all that, but I think that happens in any country, with the *güeros* [blondies] and the blacks, too. It's part of everyday life, both in Mexico and the United States, and everywhere else.

Paco also wanted offer *los gringos* a final moral assessment of his years working as a coyote, shepherding migrants from Matamoros to Houston:

I was a good coyote. I consider myself to have been a really good coyote most of the time. Yes, I did take people's money and spent it freely, but when I had the need or the opportunity, I helped whom I could economically, lowering their fee, and I never did anyone harm. ... I consider myself to be someone who helped more than he harmed. I probably harmed the United States because of all the people I brought here, but I think that I helped more people than I hurt. All those families in Mexico and Central America. Another coyote could have brought them. But another coyote could also have hurt them, could have done lots of things to them. I even think I helped the United States more than I hurt it because in any event, the United States has lots of resources and all and if I had to do it over again I think I would do it again. I don't regret it. That's all.

CHAPTER 7

I Helped Them Because I Had Suffered, Too

Ignacio was born on the ejido of Guadalupe Victoria, Coahuila in 1926. His parents were peasants. He had worked in the fields as a child, in a steel foundry in Monclova as a young man, and as a *mojado* and *bracero* in Texas before moving to San Antonio in the 1950s, where he raised his family. When he retired, he and his wife of over fifty years moved to a ranch a few dozen miles west of town, off the road back toward Coahuila. In his later years, he would provide water, food, the use of his telephone, and a place to sleep for the night to migrants who arrived at his door after trekking through the brush away from the border. For a time around the turn of the new century, he worked for a coyote from the state of Querétaro, driving migrants from his ranch to San Antonio in the back of his pick-up truck.¹

Don Ignacio Hernández [not his real name] was born in 1926 in the southern part of the state of Coahuila on an *ejido*² named Guadalupe Victoria, not far from the town of San Buenaventura [see Map 5.2 on page 113]. He was 78 years old and living with his wife Alicia on a small ranch west of San Antonio when I interviewed him with one of my Trinity University students, Joe Pierce, in the fall of 2004. Don Ignacio's parents were *campesinos* [peasants] and he grew up helping out in the fields, sowing and cultivating crops and tending goats. He attended school only through the third grade of elementary school, for the school in his village only went through the third grade and his family was too poor to send him to another town to continue his education. When he was twelve years old, his father got very sick with a fever of some kind and couldn't work the fields for a full season. Ignacio and his brother had to take on full responsibility for the family's livelihood at that time. His parents had lent a parcel of land to another man to work a few years earlier. They asked for the land back so Ignacio could cultivate corn on it. Around the same time, one of Ignacio's uncles gave the family some goats to raise. Ignacio's younger brother then went to work tending the goats. People said that Ignacio was too young to plant and cultivate the fields on his own, but he said he could, and plowed it himself with a team of mules: "And that's how we began to work. And we matured fast that way."

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After his father recovered from his illness, Ignacio continued working the family's plot through his teens and early twenties. He fell in love and married Alicia on the ejido in July 1950, when he was 23 years old. Right after the wedding, the newlyweds went with other residents of the ejido to pick cotton for a few months near Matamoros, Tamaulipas. When they got back, they took the money they'd gotten as gifts from their wedding and that they had earned on the cotton harvest to open a little store in Guadalupe Victoria. They tried their luck at the store for a couple of years, but they couldn't make any money at it. Guadalupe Victoria was too small and people were too poor. Moreover, the couple decided they didn't want to raise their yet-to-be-born children in a village where they wouldn't be able to get an education. So they closed the store and moved to the nearby town of San Buenaventura. Ignacio's father owned a little house there in which they could live. The couple's first daughter was born in that house shortly after they moved in. There wasn't much work to be had in San Buenaventura, however, and they couldn't support themselves there by working the family's plot on the ejido. Fortunately, there was work available at the steel foundry, Altos Hornos de México, in the town of Monclova, about 25 kilometers away. Ignacio got a job at the foundry and worked there for four years. The pay was reasonably good—this was during the boom years of Mexico's postwar industrial expansion—and he was able to support his family living modestly in San Buenaventura. It was dangerous and unpleasant work, though, especially for a farm boy like Ignacio who was used to the fresh air and quiet of the countryside. The heat and fumes made him sick and jaundiced. Finally, Ignacio decided he'd had enough. He decided to try his luck *al otro lado* to work for a spell. It was 1955.

FIRST ADVENTURE IN TEXAS

Ignacio went to Piedras Negras to cross the river into Texas. He had a sister and a brother-in-law who lived there. He stayed with them for a few days to set up his first crossing. The brother-in-law had a friend, Chema, who was also planning to go work on the other side. He had gone before and already knew the route to follow. More importantly, he knew a farmer just a little past Eagle Pass, which was right across the river, who usually had work for him. The brother-in-law introduced the two men and Chema agreed to take Ignacio with him to see the farmer. Neither one of the men had papers. They waded across the river one night together and started walking along a road that led away from Eagle Pass.

We found the road and started walking away from the river towards here [San Antonio]. Chema knew the way. We walked

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along in the brush along the road, out of sight. He told me to hit the dirt whenever a car came by. Cars would come by every so often and he'd say, "Get down, *hermano!*" We finally came to a ranch and waited there until daybreak, about 15 miles from the border. We were hoping to see a man named Don Enrique, to see if he'd give us work. When he woke up and came out he said, "Sure, *muchachos*, I've got work for you to do!" Of course it was only 50 cents an hour and all he gave us was a tent to sleep under in case it rained. And we made ourselves a little bed of straw to lie on underneath it. We worked there for four or five weeks at most, clearing the fields, picking up sticks, cleaning it up so they could plant onions. Then I went back to Piedras to leave money with my brother-in-law to give to my wife. Then I crossed back over again to this side to find more work.

Ignacio didn't go back to the same onion farm on his second sojourn. While he was in Piedras Negras, he met other men who had experience crossing the border to work in Texas. He met another man like Chema, with whom he waded across the river and walked to a farm a few miles away from the border. This time the farmer paid them two dollars a day plus food. He worked there for a few weeks and went back again to Piedras Negras to leave more money for his wife. By now, it was the end of June, around the time of the annual festival in San Buenaventura. Ignacio would have liked to have gone back to visit then, but a friend invited him to go with him to try their luck crossing into West Texas from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Wanting to make some more money before heading home, he decided to go with the man to Juárez, hundreds of miles away (see Map 7.1).

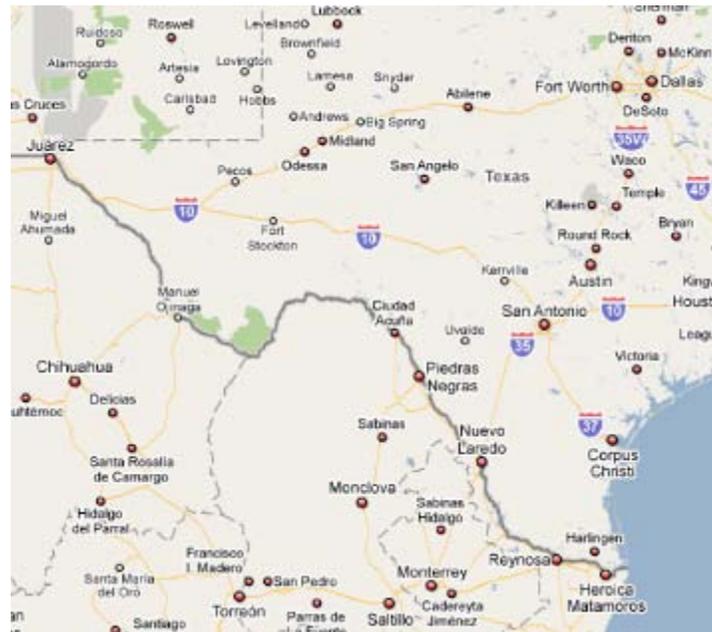
Ignacio's friend had a contact that he thought would be perfect for helping them find work in Texas further away from the border where they could earn better wages. The friend was a *trailerero* [driver of a tractor-trailer rig] who hauled produce all over the state. They waited for the man for four or five days in Juárez. When he finally arrived, he said that he was sorry, but he couldn't take them with him away from the border into Texas. He was Mexican himself and could get arrested and deported if the Border Patrol caught him hauling them in his truck. The *trailerero* offered to help them out another way. He was hauling a load of watermelons from the Rio Grande Valley that he needed to cut up and sell in El Paso, just across the Río Grande from Juárez.

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He said, "You can work for me one day cutting up the watermelon and delivering it." We said, "Great!" and we went with him in the truck. And we spent the day helping him with the watermelons, just in El Paso. It was easy to cross the river because it hardly rains there. So there was almost no water and we just skipped right across.

When they were done with the watermelons, the trailero paid them and dropped them off along the railroad tracks outside of town, where the two men hoped to hop a freight train that would take them away from the border.

Map 7.1. Mexico-Texas Border



After the trailero dropped Ignacio and his friend off along the tracks, they hopped the next train that came by. They were not alone in doing this. A little while after they got on, the train stopped and dozens of Mexican men like them were arrested by the Border Patrol. The agents took Ignacio and his friend back to the station in one of their cars. While there, he was subjected to a very unpleasant interrogation by an aggressive agent:

I had an encounter with an agent there. He was taking my fingerprints and asked me, "Where did you cross?" I told him the truth: that I had walked right across the river downtown that

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morning, right in front of the station where we were. This made him mad for some reason. He said, "No you didn't!" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "You came across with your *tarjeta local* [border crossing card]! I said, "I don't have any *tarjeta local*!" Then he says, "No, my boss says you do. You can try lying to him if you want. You Mexicans are all real *coyotes*." He was a *gringo*, an Anglo, but he spoke Spanish. Then I told him, "Look, I'm telling you the truth, mister. I've got no reason to lie. If I had a *tarjeta local* I'd say so, but I don't!"

Ignacio was upset, not only because the agent accused him of lying, but also that he had called him a *coyote*, a Mexican slang term with various connotations, none of them complimentary:

Spener: What did it mean that he called you a *coyote*?

Don Ignacio: That we were devious [*mañosos*], that we lied and all that. It was offensive because a coyote is a very astute animal. That's what they call people in Spanish who are untrustworthy, who do all kinds of bad stuff, lie and all. I didn't like that he called me a coyote.³

Given that he was in an inherently vulnerable position and the agent was not going to accept any of his protestations, Ignacio decided to bite his tongue. He just wanted to get out of there as painlessly as he could. The agent, for reasons that Ignacio did not understand, seemed to take some special pleasure in showing him who was boss:

I was offended because he was yelling at me. He was treating me badly. I was mad but I stopped responding and didn't say anything more because I thought he might actually beat me. As he was taking my fingerprints he took his pistol out and stuck it under his belt in the front of his pants just so I could see it. That was it, though. I felt better when they told me to get out of there. They put us on a bus and took us back across to the other side, to Ciudad Juárez. They didn't put us in jail or anything. They just sent us back to the Mexican side.

But this same agent was on the bus with us, with the *mojados*. And somebody complained that his wallet had been stolen. This was before they let us off the bus. So as we were crossing the bridge, the bus stops and the agent says, "Somebody's lost his wallet and one of you must have it. So we're going to search you all to see who has the wallet." So they begin to search everyone on the bus, but nobody has the wallet. Finally, they get to a guy at the very back of the bus and he refuses to let them search him. The agent gets mad at this and says, "So you have the wallet!" I don't know if the guy had the wallet or not, but they arrested him

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and took him off back to jail on the U.S. side. They let the rest of us off in Juárez.

Ignacio had had enough of trying to work in the United States at this point. He took the bus home and when he got there, “the fiestas were still going on real nice in San Buenaventura.”

When the fiestas were over, Ignacio had to face the same old problem again: How was he going to make a living? He didn't want to go back to Altos Hornos, so he tried agricultural labor at home again, this time as a hired hand. He could only make about seven pesos a day that way, though, not enough to support a family, *ni para los frijoles* [not even enough to buy beans]. There was a big flood in Piedras Negras that year and he headed there to work on a clean-up crew, digging houses out from the mud. He went as much to figure out how to cross again as to earn pesos from that short-term job. While he was there, another man working on the flood clean-up told him he'd heard about a truck farmer across the river in Eagle Pass who was looking to hire some men to work for him. Not wanting to go back as a *mojado* again, Ignacio was able to get a *tarjeta local* to cross the border by working through a coyote⁴ who knew whom to bribe in the U.S. government office in Eagle Pass that issued the crossing cards, which were intended only for residents of Mexican border cities, and not to work, only to shop and make social visits. With this card, he was able to work for a while on farms near Eagle Pass and send money home to his family in San Buenaventura.

In the late 1950s, Ignacio began to work legally in the United States in the Bracero Program, the agricultural guest worker program that the U.S. and Mexican governments originally negotiated in 1942 to meet labor shortages brought about by U.S. entry into World War II. Getting a contract was complicated, time-consuming, and expensive. It involved going to a special recruitment that the Mexican government set up in Monterrey. If a man didn't have a contact working in the center or didn't hire a coyote to bribe the right people, he could wait months to get a contract:

Don Ignacio: I went to Monterrey to be contracted several times.

Spener: And how did it work in Monterrey?

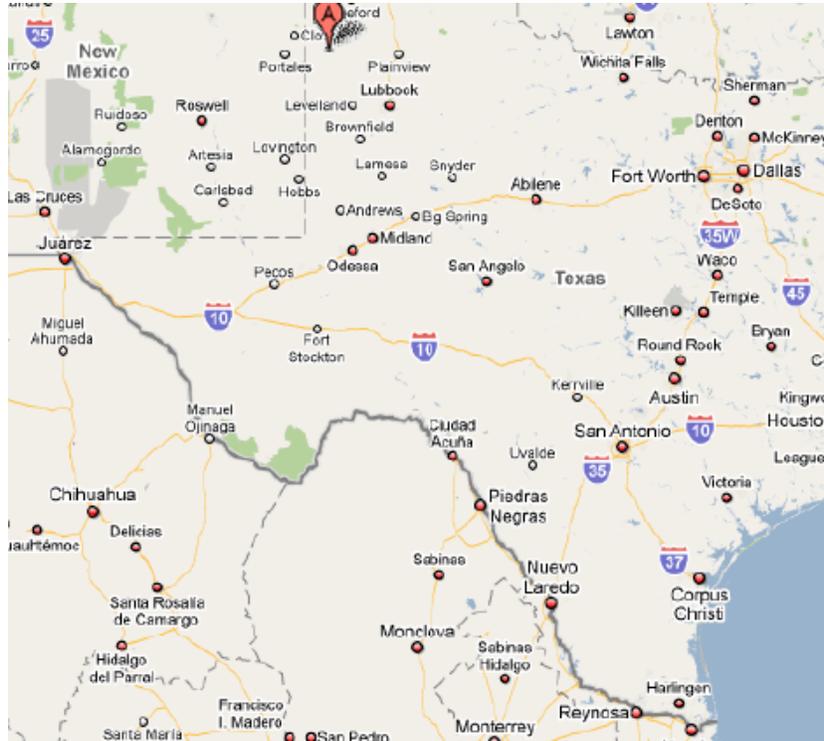
Don Ignacio: Well, it was real tough. Real, real tough. Because in Mexico there are many people, a lot of people pile up. In Monterrey, there was a tremendous wait to find work.

Spener: So what did you have to do to get a contract, if it was so tough?

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Don Ignacio: It's like this. Sometimes you have contacts so you can get through quickly, but you have to pay a certain amount. Back then, this kind of coyote didn't transport you. This kind was just there to get you in on the contracting. And that was what you wanted, to get contracted.

Map 7.3. Muleshoe, Texas (indicated by red letter A)



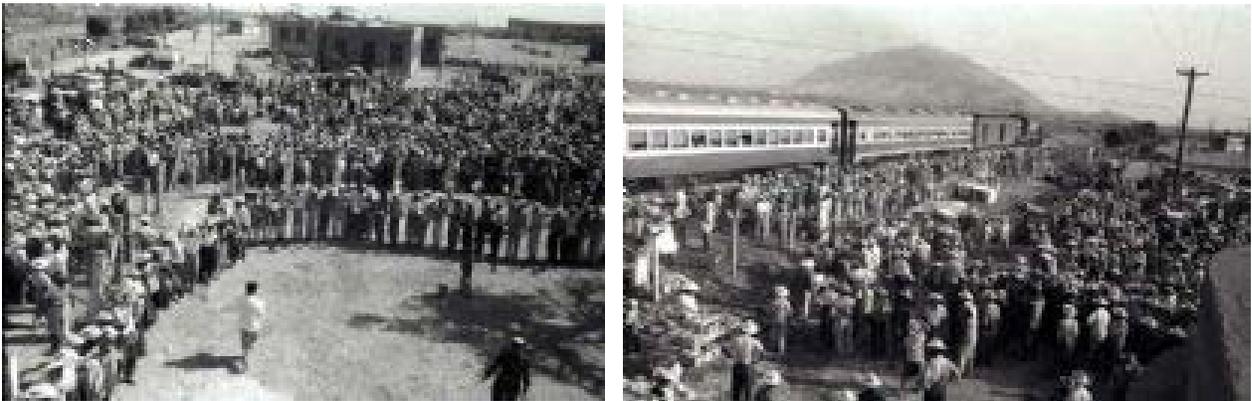
Ignacio made several sojourns as a bracero to farms around the west Texas town of Muleshoe after passing through the Monterrey. He would be contracted for only three months at a time, but his employers could get his contract renewed several times before he had to return to Mexico and go back through the contracting center in Monterrey. In this way, he said, he could stay working in Muleshoe for up to eighteen months at a time. This was a good thing, for even with paying a coyote to speed things up, going through the contracting process was never a pleasant experience. As an example of this, Don Ignacio related an incident he remembered painfully well:

My friend said, let's go to Monterrey and get ourselves contracted there. And I said, great, let's go. And so we went. When we got to Monterrey there was a tremendous crowd at the contracting

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center. So we went to stay in the home of an acquaintance we had there. We paid him to let us stay there, since he helped people out that way sometimes. People he knew, and he'd give them food and a room and then you'd pay him something. We'd go every morning to the center to see if we could get a contract, until we found this *mordelón*, this crooked cop, who told us about a man, a coyote, who for twenty dollars [about \$180 in 2008 dollars] could get us on our way tomorrow.

Figure 7.1. Bracero processing center in Monterrey, 1950s



Source: National Museum of American History

http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=770&pagekey=776

This man [the coyote] told us we'd spend the night on the grounds of the recruitment center.⁵ We could stay anywhere there. And I told him, no way, how are we going to stay here when we were so comfortable at our friend's house. And he said, no, because you don't want to not be here when they call you. They'll skip over you and we've already paid them. So, I said okay, we'll stay. And he told us about a lady who'd give you a piece of cardboard to lie on in an empty room in her house, where you could spend the night. She gave us the cardboard to sleep on and we were tired and fell right to sleep. But then I woke up and began to itch, like something was biting me. So then I'm wide awake. My friend is still sound asleep. Then I realize what it is and I call out to him, "Listen, there are *chinchas* [bedbugs] here! I said that we couldn't stay here. *¡Hijole!* I said, let's get out of here and we ran out.

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But the señora was upset, and she said, "Why are you leaving, *señores*, it's not time yet. It's still early!" And I said we were going because the pieces of cardboard she'd gave us to sleep on were full of chinchas. She said, "That can't be!" And I said, "Well look, here the little animals are!" Anyway, we had no choice but to leave. So we went back out to where we'd been waiting in line before. There were a ton of people still there, since hardly anyone left to sleep and a few slept there on the ground, others nodding off here and there. There were some stands where they were selling tacos. We went there and my friend began to pull the chinchas off his jacket. He must have pulled off a couple of hundred of them!

Later that morning their contracts were approved and Ignacio and his friend were put on a train to Reynosa. They crossed the international bridge across the river into Hidalgo, Texas, where they were fumigated and given a health inspection by the U.S. authorities. It was a humiliating ritual, as Don Ignacio related:

They boarded us on a train to Reynosa and then we went across the bridge into Hidalgo, Texas. That's where they fumigate you as you enter the country. They spray your whole body. We were standing there nude, lined up waiting for the doctors to inspect us. And you had to drop your drawers and show yourself to the doctor so he could see if you had some disease down there [points to his crotch]. Well, this older guy was in front of me. He drops his drawers and passes in front of the doctor, facing him, with an erection! And the doctor says to him, "Move along, move along. You're awfully excited!" The old guy had gotten excited! [Laughs].

Figure 7.2. Contract Mexican laborers being fumigated with the pesticide DDT in Hidalgo, Texas, in 1956.



Leonard Nadel, Courtesy National Museum of American History

http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/collection/object_441.html

Ignacio spent a total of five years working on and off in Muleshoe, in west Texas near Lubbock, under the “specials” section of the Bracero Program. The “specials” section was for agricultural workers with special skills that were in short supply. The advantage to farmers and the Mexican workers contracted in this way was that the workers’ contracts could be renewed several times before the worker would be required to return to Mexico.⁶ He got into this program for the first time by going to an office after crossing the border at Hidalgo. Contracts were available in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, but Ignacio and one of his friends had heard they could do better for themselves in West Texas. They figured out how to convince the officials to give them a contract in the specials program in west Texas by observing how they interviewed other applicants:

We went to the office and the men there greeted us. They asked us if we wanted to go out west. We said we did, but we only had a contract for here in the Valley. We’d seen them interview another man in line before us:

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"Have you worked in the fields before?"

"Yes, I have."

"What do you know how to do? Can you drive a tractor?"

"Well, no."

"Do you know how to work irrigation equipment?"

"Well, no."

And they didn't take him. So, when it was my turn, I knew what I had to say.

"Do you know how to drive a tractor?"

"Yes, a little. I've driven a tractor, a little Ford, but only on the road."

"Do you know how to irrigate?"

"Yes, I know how to irrigate."

"What did you do it with?"

"Well, I've used a *paleta con boquilla* [water-wheel with nozzle] before."

"Okay, you've got a job."

So, they took me to the office, got all my papers together, and we headed out to West Texas. That's how I ended up in Muleshoe.

Life and work in Muleshoe was harder than he expected, however. He did all kinds of farm work there. The biggest problem, he discovered, was the weather. It was much farther north than Ignacio had ever worked before, and in the winter months the cold, snow, and ice meant that work ground to a halt, and with it his pay:

I had worked there for a few months and then went back home to Mexico for a visit. And then when I came back I found out about the climate there. I came back in January and thought I'd go right back to work. But there was nothing. The snows had come and when it snows and ices, you can't work. So my boss didn't have a job for me. I didn't get any work until the end of March!

When he did get work, it was as a tractor driver. He had gotten especially good at plowing the fields with the tractor during his first sojourn. His

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winter unemployment finally ended when a couple of men who'd seen his tractor work hired him to do the spring plowing for them.

They liked my work because I worked really well with the tractor. I had good eyesight for plowing the fields in really straight rows. They started out paying me thirty dollars a week, then they gave me a raise to forty, then to forty-five. It was a reliable job. And when my first 18-month contract ran out, they gave me another one.

Things had gone so well for him with the tractor work that Ignacio got up the nerve to ask his employer to sponsor him to immigrate to the United States, i.e., to come work for him as a permanent resident, not as a temporarily contracted bracero. The farmer had refused, though, saying that workers who got their papers always left to work elsewhere as soon as they got them. He continued to go back and forth between Muleshoe and his home in Coahuila through the remaining years of the Bracero program, which was ended unilaterally by the United States in 1964.

Travel back and forth across the border in those days was considerably more arduous than it is today. Roads were rougher, vehicles were slower, and accommodations were more primitive. Ignacio usually returned via Piedras Negras and would spend the night there before continuing on the bus to San Buenaventura. He remembered one evening he spent there particularly well:

I was with this man I'd met in Muleshoe. He was an older guy but we'd become friends. We went out one evening in Piedras. He had a son, Manuel, who also worked in Muleshoe. This old man's contract had run out just like mine. We were in Piedras together and were hanging out in a hotel. We had a little money between us and we went out drinking. We went to a few cantinas and wound up drunk. And I woke up in jail the next morning! I don't know how but there I was! The other guys in there said, "What did you do?" And I said, "I didn't do anything. I just got drunk." And they said, "Well, you were really drunk when they brought you in here." And it was a twenty peso fine. I told the officers, "Here's your money. But I didn't do anything. I was just drunk!" I don't know where my friend spent the night.

We found each other in the morning and I asked how things had gone for him. And he answered, "Man, why did you let me drink so much?" I said, "How was I supposed to stop you?" And he said, "Well, what's done is done." Neither one of us had hardly any money left, so he called his son in Muleshoe and asked him to send us some. Meanwhile, I went to a guy I knew in Piedras and asked to borrow 50 pesos from him to hold us over until the

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money arrived from Muleshoe. I gave him a watch I'd bought in Texas to hold until I could pay him back the money. He said, "I'll take the watch, but not because I don't trust you, only because I won't lose it." He took it and kept it there. Finally the money arrived and we went and gave him his fifty pesos and he gave me back my watch. And then we went to Monterrey to get in line for another contract.

Ignacio was working in Muleshoe again when word came out that the Bracero Program was coming to an end. A friend encouraged him to approach his employer again to ask if he would help Ignacio immigrate permanently to the United States. The employer was still reluctant, fearing Ignacio would go work somewhere else where he could make more money if he had his papers. He finally agreed to sponsor him when Ignacio reminded him that if he didn't help him get his papers he was definitely going to lose him since he wouldn't be able to come back as a bracero anymore. He filed his application to become a legal permanent resident just before his final bracero contract ended. Ignacio went home to San Buenaventura to wait for the process to run its course.

Nearly a year later, Ignacio received a letter at home telling him to report to the U.S. consulate in Monterrey to finalize his residency papers. He went to the consulate and showed them the letter he received. The official read over the letter and told him he needed to "come back on such and such a day at such and such an hour with thus and such letters in hand, and if I didn't have them all I shouldn't come because my application wouldn't be approved." He went back to San Buenaventura to get all the papers together. The one thing he didn't have was a letter showing that he had completed his mandatory military service in Mexico—because, as was common, he had not actually served in the military. The officials in the consulate were very specific that he needed this letter in order to have his immigration application approved. Ignacio knocked on all kinds of doors trying to find out how he could get this magical letter. Eventually, Ignacio was referred by consular officials themselves to a notary in Piedras Negras that could help him obtain this vital document. The notary's name was Severo Treviño:

So I went to talk to Sr. Treviño. "What can I do for you?" he asked when I walked in. I told him that they recommended I see him because I was trying to immigrate to the United States and I didn't have any paperwork showing my military service. And he said, yes, he had arranged a lot of those, but that it was going to cost me—a *mordida* [bribe]. He said it would be eighteen dollars. I said, "Fine, I'll take it." And he said he couldn't get it right away,

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but if I paid him the eighteen dollars he'd send it to me in San Buenaventura in a week. So, I paid him the eighteen dollars and I left. Days and days went by and the letter didn't come. Finally, my appointment date in Monterrey was coming up so I decided to go to Piedras Negras to see what the problem was. When I walked into the office, Señor Treviño was there and immediately said to me, "Look, man, here's your paper."

A few days later Ignacio went to his appointment at the consulate in Monterrey where his application was approved and he received his green card.

With his green card in hand, Ignacio returned to Muleshoe to go back to work for the farmer that sponsored his application. It would take some more time and money to get papers for his wife and kids to move to Texas with him. He worked through the end of the year and was getting ready to head home for the Christmas holidays. The farmer typically paid his workers a generous Christmas bonus every year—around two-hundred dollars. When all the rest of the workers were given their bonuses, Ignacio was not. He went to see his boss to find out why he didn't get a bonus. The boss told him that he wasn't getting a bonus because he'd missed part of the year while he was waiting for his papers to come through. He said he'd get a Christmas bonus again as always the next year. At that point Ignacio angrily told the farmer that there would be no next year. Now that he had his papers he knew that he could easily find work elsewhere, so he left Muleshoe for good, confirming the farmer's long-held expectation that his workers would leave him if they had full freedom in the U.S. labor market. Eventually, Ignacio would settle in San Antonio, Texas, where he worked, raised his family, and lived until his retirement in the early 1990s.

GOLDEN YEARS ON THE RANCHITO

In spite of having lived for nearly forty years in San Antonio, Don Ignacio [the title "Don" signifies respect for an older, married man] always had remained a country boy at heart. He liked the fresh air, the quiet, and being surrounded by nature. When he retired, he and Alicia left their kids and grandkids in town and moved to a modest home set on a small ranch a few dozen miles to the west, off the highway leading to Del Rio. They had a vegetable and flower garden they tended, along with some chickens, a dog, and a few goats. As an old man, Don Ignacio's days of rambling through the borderlands as a roustabout in search of work were long over. Much to his surprise, though, he found that his quiet little *ranchito* out in the middle of the *monte* was located along a trail that hundreds of contemporary *mojados* hiked on their way away from the border. He quickly discovered this when

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groups of migrants would stumble out of the brush and knock on his door to ask for help. I had gone to interview Don Ignacio not about his days as a migrant himself, but on the recommendation of one of his relatives in San Antonio, who was an acquaintance of mine. She had told me about how he helped migrants walking across his ranch. This is what Don Ignacio had to say about it when I first asked:

Spener: So, living out here, do a lot of migrants still come through this area?

Don Ignacio: Oh, yes!

Spener: How is that? How do you know?

Don Ignacio: Well, they come to me here. Right here on the ranch.

Spener: But how do they get here?

Don Ignacio: They walk right out of the *monte*.

Spener: But where are they coming from?

Don Ignacio: They come through Acuña, through Piedras Negras, and hike through the monte. Some of them already know the way and since they've been this way before, they serve as a guide for the others. There aren't as many now as before, but they still come.

Spener: And do they come on their own or does some coyote bring them through here?

Don Ignacio: Like I said, they have a guide and they pay him. The guide comes on foot, too. They all come on foot through the monte. And the one that knows the route the best, that knows all the paths to follow, he guides them. They walk at night, guiding themselves by the radio antennas. ... They walk for five, six, or even seven days. But they don't walk during the day. They just keep coming until they get here. I used to have a little room in an outbuilding in back of the house that always stayed dry in the rain. It's all broken down now, but even still people who know this place come here and knock on my door. I used to have some bales of hay in the room. I'd tell them they could sleep on the bales. Just that they shouldn't smoke because they could catch fire and burn the place down! They'd spend the night there and leave the next day.

Spener: How many people would there be in a group?

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Don Ignacio: Sometimes there'd be a lot. I used to get ten or twelve at a time.

Spener: Wouldn't you be afraid being out here all alone? With that many people coming through?

Don Ignacio: No, not at all. [Chuckles]. They were good, hardworking people. They just didn't have papers, that was all.

People didn't always spend the night. Sometimes they'd just want to use the phone to call to have someone come pick them up. Or they'd just ask for some water or food. Don Ignacio and Alicia were always happy to help out in that way.

One of the migrants that Don Ignacio helped out was a young man from Querétaro named Juan. The first time he passed by Don Ignacio's ranch, he was by himself. Later he brought other people with him, guiding them through the brush. After learning to hike the route himself, he "went pro" and began to work as a small-time coyote.⁷ First he brought along just two or three people. Then it was four or five. Later he would bring up to ten or twelve at a time. Most of the people he brought were *paisanos* from his part of Querétaro, but later he also brought people from other parts of Mexico, including Guanajuato and Zacatecas. Back home in Querétaro he went by the nickname *El Correcaminos*—The Roadrunner. He offered a low-cost, no frills, fly-by-night service. He was, as a migrant from Nuevo León state once describe to me, a typical coyote *rascuache*.⁸ The Correcaminos' customers may not have had to pay him as much money as other coyotes charged, but they made up the difference in toil and suffering:

Don Ignacio: Listen, when they get here they're in bad shape. We give them clothing—shirts, pants—because they are absolutely destroyed when they arrive, shoeless, hungry. They tell us, "We haven't eaten for three days!"

Spener: How is it that their guide doesn't give them anything to eat?

Don Ignacio: He doesn't have any food to give them either. He suffers the same as they do.

Spener: Don't they stock up on supplies before they start walking?

Don Ignacio: They do bring some food along. They bring things like *pinole*. It's made of dried corn. They grind up the corn into a powder and mix in some *piloncillo* [a kind of brown sugar], put it in a plastic bag and eat it on the trail. They bring cans of beans.

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That's how they come, bringing as little as possible and sometimes they run out on the way and really have to struggle to make it.

Spener: And why do they walk all the way here? We're a long ways past the *garita* [highway immigration checkpoint].

Don Ignacio: Look, there's a lot of *migración* [Border Patrol] on the highway. If you drive along the highway between here and the border, you'll run into the *trocas de inmigración* [Border Patrol vehicles] right away.

Don Ignacio empathized with the Correcaminos and the migrants who traveled with him. As he had done with other groups of migrants, he gave them food and water and let them use his phone and spend the night in his outbuilding.

He was a good guy. He was one of those guides who suffers right alongside the people he's guiding. If there's no food, there's no food for anybody. If there's no water, there's none for him either. If they get caught, everyone gets caught. Because they're all in it together. The coyotes, the real coyotes are the ones that travel by car and if the Border Patrol comes, they're nowhere to be found. They charge a thousand or two thousand dollars. But those are the coyotes from the border. The big coyotes. This guy was a *coyotito*, a little coyote. There are thousands of them. They know the route and come walking all the way from the border.⁹

The Correcaminos and Don Ignacio got to know one another as the coyote made repeated stops in at the old ranchero's door in the latter half of the 1990s. One day the Correcaminos made Don Ignacio a bold and unexpected proposition: He would be willing to pay the old man fifty dollars a head to drive the migrants he was leading from the ranch to the town of Von Ormy on Interstate 35 just south of San Antonio. Don Ignacio was leery of doing this. He knew that he could get in big trouble if he got caught. It so happened, however, that his ailing sister was living in a nursing facility in Allende, Coahuila and depended on him to help support her. He had been sending one-hundred dollars a month to cover the costs of her care, something he could scarcely afford, living on his monthly Social Security check and meager savings. He realized he could make \$500 on a single trip carrying ten migrants in the back of his pick-up truck. So, he decided to do it and see how it worked out. The first trip went well. The Correcaminos and his ten customers loaded into his pick-up one evening and drove to the Von Ormy without incident. He dropped them off at the house of one of the Correcaminos' contacts who would take them further north and help them

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find work. When they got there, the Correcaminos collected fifty dollars from each of the migrants and handed Don Ignacio the cash. He drove home five-hundred dollars richer for only a couple of hours of easy work.

Don Ignacio and El Correcaminos continued their working relationship for several years. Sometimes the coyote would pay him as much as one-hundred dollars per migrant to drive them further, to Bulverde, Texas, north of San Antonio on U.S. Highway 281. Don Ignacio liked the money, but after his sister died he really did not have need for it. He began to get cold feet. Moreover, his grown kids insisted that he stop working for the coyote, fearing that their elderly father would spend his final years in jail instead of with their mother on the ranchito. El Correcaminos kept coming as often as once a month, but Don Ignacio began to tell him he wanted to quit.

I would tell him he should stop doing this. "Stay here and find work here. Get a regular job! You're making me take risk that I don't want to. I don't need the money. I like it, but I don't need to do this. For me, it would be better if you left me alone. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in jail!" And he would say, "No, please, just this one last time." And then another and another.

The end of their working relationship came rather dramatically one night in the first year of the new century.

I was on my way to Bulverde with my wife and ten migrants in the truck. They were paying me really well, one-hundred dollars a person. We had five people in the bed of the truck under a tarp and five more lying down on the floor of the back seat. And a police officer pulled me over just as I was about to get on 1604 [the outer loop highway that circles San Antonio]. So I stopped and I looked at my wife, who was in the front seat with me. I thought, "Here we go!" The policeman says to me, "Why are you driving so slow?" I told him, "Well, I don't know my way around here very well." And he asks me, "Where are you going?" I said just up to Bulverde. He said, "I got a call on the radio that you were driving really slow. You really need to pick up the pace, sir." Fortunately, it was dark and he never looked in the back seat. He didn't even give me a ticket. And I said, "That's it! I'm never doing this again."

After that he told the Correcaminos that he would not be driving for him again under any circumstances. Besides, he told me, "I can't see at night anymore anyway. I can't drive at night, and after that scare with the police, I swore that was the end of it." Later, Ignacio heard that his coyote friend had finally taken his advice and gotten out of the guide business. He took a

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job and Houston where they paid him well. The former Correcaminos had even brought his wife and kids up to live with him. In addition, the flow of migrants hiking through the brush on the route leading to Don Ignacio's ranch slowed considerably after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the subsequent economic recession in the United States.

At the end of our interview, I asked Don Ignacio how he felt in retrospect about having illegally driven all those times for the Correcaminos. His feelings about the experience were ambivalent:

Don Ignacio: On the one hand, I felt guilty because I was breaking the law. And my son told me to stop doing it. He said they were going to catch me. So, I don't do it anymore.

Spener: And how did you feel about it in a moral sense, as opposed to in a legal sense?

Don Ignacio: Like I was saying, I regard it as a blessing from God, since I had this expense for my sister, and my [retirement] check was so little.

Spener: It was a blessing because of the money.

Don Ignacio: Because of the money.

Spener: But how did you feel in the sense of your relationship with the migrants and with this guide. Did you think you were doing something good? Or was it bad?

Don Ignacio: I feel good about it, because, look, I had also suffered a lot. . . . I like to be able to help these people because I know what they suffer. And they're my *paisanos*. They're the same as me.

Although the flow had diminished, migrants continued to pass near Don Ignacio's place. He had heard there were other men who lived nearby who were willing, like he had been, to drive them further up the road towards their destinations in the state of Texas and beyond.

Not too long ago a lady came by who owns a restaurant a little down the road from here. She came because she had been at church and a Mexican man was waiting there outside at the end of services looking for a ride. She wanted to know if I would take him. I told her I couldn't. She asked if I knew anyone else who could take him and said he could pay. I don't know who took him, but someone did. And they got paid.

CHAPTER 8

Criminal Enterprise or Christian Charity?

The Flores Family of Naranjo City, Texas

Berta and Ángel Flores and their children were a family of Spanish-speaking *tejanos* who provided sanctuary to hundreds of immigrants over the course of many years on the grounds of a business they owned in a small town in South Texas. The family's property was raided on several occasions by the Border Patrol, resulting in the arrest of dozens of immigrants who were housed on the premises after having been transported there by coyotes they had hired. Finally, as the result of an undercover investigation, four members of the family were arrested, convicted of harboring "illegal aliens," and sentenced to several years in federal prison. The government claimed that the family was part of a lucrative "alien-smuggling" network that illegally profited from the desperation of migrants. The family, as well as some members of the community, argued that they were simply offering food and a place to stay to people whose immigration status in the United States was not their concern.

One weekday in early February in the late 1990s, the U.S. Border Patrol arrested scores of undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants who were packed like sardines into a tiny apartment complex in the small town of Naranjo City, Texas. It was one of the biggest single apprehensions of migrants in one place that anyone had ever seen in South Texas. The migrants had been staying in small rooms located behind a neighborhood grocery store that also functioned as a carry-out kitchen, bar, and pool hall, as well as in some other rooms in a house and motel nearby. The store and rooms were owned and operated by a local Naranjo City couple, Ángel and Berta Flores, while the house and motel were owned by their daughter Frida and son Darío, respectively.¹ The raid on the Flores properties occurred as part of a special Border Patrol operation intended to deter coyotes from guiding and transporting migrants through one of the principal highway corridors leading away from the Rio Grande into the Texas interior. This unauthorized movement of migrants had grown rapidly in the 1990s and the Border Patrol aimed to put a stop to it. Agents

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had been alerted to the migrants staying on the Flores' several premises in the course of arresting other migrants during a sweep of the streets of Naranjo City. In spite of the apprehension and subsequent deportation of such a large number of migrants, no one was criminally-prosecuted for harboring or transporting the "aliens," which was a felony offense (§1324 of Title 8 of the U.S. code), even though it seemed evident that migrants were not making their journeys independently.

The reason that U.S. authorities did not prosecute members of the Flores family for "harboring and transporting illegal aliens" was that they could not prove that the family actually knew that the people who were renting rooms from them were not legally in the country and that they had rented them the rooms in a conscious effort to assist in the commission of an illegal act. Following the mass apprehension, the Border Patrol secretly began an investigation in conjunction with the F.B.I. and the I.R.S. which culminated a year later in the apprehension of several dozen migrants on the premises of the grocery store and apartments and the arrest and prosecution for "smuggling and harboring undocumented immigrants" of Berta and Ángel Flores, their daughter Josefina Gómez, and their employee Daniel Montoya. Authorities identified Berta Flores as the "mastermind" of the "smuggling operation." A priest who served the family's church complained that the authorities had gone overboard in making a show of their arrest, with officers bursting onto the premises of the Flores store wearing bullet-proof vests and with automatic weapons drawn as if they were engaging in a SWAT-style rescue of hostages. "Where the hell did that come from?" he said. There had never been any reports of anyone in danger or distress at the Flores place. "Look," he insisted, "it wasn't called for. It was really like killing flies with hammers. It was all for show."

Two of Berta and Ángel's sons, Ángel, Jr. and Darío, and another of their employees, María Hernández, were subsequently arrested and charged. They all pleaded guilty in federal court to charges of conspiracy to transport and harbor undocumented migrants, in exchange for prosecutors dropping additional charges of money laundering. All the family members were sentenced to serve time in federal prison.

According to the U.S. authorities, this "organization" was one of the most structured they had seen in the region and the Flores family was its "nucleus". Their "smuggling operation" had run for over a decade and was believed to have spirited thousands of undocumented immigrants past the checkpoints for traffic leaving the Rio Grande Valley. Immigrants had paid hundreds of dollars each to be smuggled into the United States, feeding a

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“covert industry” that everyone in Naranjo City had known about for years. The federal judge who heard the case meted out an especially harsh sentence to Berta Flores, the alleged “godmother” of the smuggling ring. At the sentencing hearing, the judge called Mrs. Flores the most culpable, acting as a shrewd and domineering businesswoman who pressured the rest of the family to go along with her illegal project. In addition to handing out the stiff sentences, the judge ordered the confiscation of the buildings owned by the family in order to prevent them from going back into the smuggling business after their release. Nonetheless, the Border Patrol was doubtful that the Flores’ incarceration had halted migrant traffic through Naranjo City, telling the press that, just as would be the case in any profitable business activity, someone else had already filled the vacuum.

THE FLORES FAMILY: THEIR BACKGROUND AND BUSINESS

Ángel Flores, Sr. was born in San Benito, Texas on July 26, 1938. He was one of ten children born to a father from the Mexican state of San Luis Potosí and a mother from San Fernando, Tamaulipas. His parents met after crossing the border to work agriculture in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Ángel moved with his family to a migrant labor camp in Naranjo City when he was six years old. A couple of years later, the family moved to Hargill, Texas, a small settlement a few miles to the west of Naranjo City, after Ángel’s father got a job working as a laborer on a cotton farm there. The family was poor and Ángel and his brothers and sisters traveled around the Valley working on the farms, as well as further away to work in the fields in Arkansas. Ángel dropped out of school after completing the eighth grade and went to work full time as a farmworker with his father. In 1952 Ángel moved back to Naranjo City, where he has lived ever since. As an older teenager, he worked in local Mexican grocery stores before finding a job with a nationwide supermarket chain. In 1959, he married Berta, when he was nineteen years old and she was just seventeen. Ángel continued to work for the supermarket in Naranjo City for twenty years, eventually rising to the level of assistant manager. Although he spoke Spanish fluently and recognized himself as ethnically Mexican, Ángel had only been to Mexico a couple of times as a child to visit relatives in his mother’s hometown in Tamaulipas, and he was not in touch with anyone currently living across the border at the time I interviewed him in 2002.

Berta Flores was born in 1940 in Las Peñitas, Texas, along the Rio Grande near Mission. Both of her parents were native *tejanos*, but her grandparents were *mexicanos*. Her paternal grandfather had owned 500 acres of land near the river, but it now belonged to her cousins, since her father had sold

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his portion to a brother for \$500 years ago, given there were too many children for them all to make a go of it as farmers or ranchers on their individual plots. Berta's family moved to Naranjo City when she was two years old and she had lived there ever since. She was one of eight children. As was the case with Ángel, she and her family worked in the fields, both locally in the Valley and picking cotton in Central Texas. Berta worked in the fields as a migrant until she was sixteen. She married Ángel a year later and had all five of her children with him by the time she was twenty-five. She continued to work in the fields in the Valley until 1970, when she and Ángel opened their business together. Like her husband, Berta had little contact with anyone who currently lived in Mexico, although relatives from Mexico had visited her family in Naranjo City while she was growing up. She herself had only crossed the border into Mexico a few times and then only to visit the border towns immediately across the river. Also like Ángel, Berta spoke Spanish fluently and thought of herself as a *mexicana* in cultural terms.

Ángel and Berta opened their "mom & pop" grocery store in 1968. Ángel continued to work for the supermarket for another three years before his employers told him he had to quit because he was competing with them. The business started selling groceries and carry-out food cooked by Berta, including tamales, fajitas, chicken, rice, and beans, served with homemade tortillas. Subsequently they added pool tables and a small bar serving beer to customers and also began to rent-out modest rooms located in outbuildings they had behind their house and store. Their children, in different ways at different times, also helped out with the business. Located on a residential street in a working-class neighborhood on the north side of Naranjo City, most of their customers were from the neighborhood. Nevertheless, nearly from the time they opened, a portion of their clientele included Mexican and Central American migrants passing through Naranjo City on their journeys north into the U.S. interior. It was the evolving relationship with these customers that eventually led to the demise of their business following their arrest and imprisonment in the late 1990s.

Although the Flores family never got rich from their business, they were fairly successful in local terms and rose to some prominence in their small town of 12,000 residents. Ángel served on the city council in the early 1980s and sat on several county boards over the course of a couple of decades. When I interviewed him for the first time in 2002, he counted the current mayor and council members as his friends. Ángel bragged to me that there were 23,000 people living in Warren County and he knew just about all of them. Berta was also well-known, politically active, and had

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many relatives in town. According to one of Naranjo City's prominent Anglo residents, Berta could deliver a lot of votes to her preferred candidates because of her large extended family and charismatic personality. He told me that Berta "was a leader in the local Hispanic community" and that "the politicians benefitted from her support."

Berta and her family were active in their local Catholic church, whose members and clergy had a strong commitment to social justice in the community, including with regard to migrants passing through. According to one prominent local politician, "Berta and Ángel always cared for the poor," a statement with which others in the community who knew them concurred. In the late 1970s, when workers in the citrus groves around Naranjo City went on strike demanding better wages, working conditions, and recognition of their union, Berta donated plates of food she cooked to serve the strikers, bringing it straight to the picket lines. Although she no longer worked in the fields, she, too, had harvested fruit in the past and contributed the food as an act of solidarity. The citrus workers eventually won their strike, but it turned out to be a pyrrhic victory as growers subsequently cut back on production and hired far fewer workers in the groves.

Berta also battled the local school district over its treatment of Mexican American pupils, who were taught primarily by Anglo teachers that did not speak Spanish and "tracked" them into less-academically enriching programs. On behalf of her children, Berta was one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit that challenged this discriminatory treatment of Mexican American children in Naranjo City. Berta had the following to say about the conditions that gave rise to the lawsuit:

Well, it was the discrimination. It was discriminating against the poor and the Mexicans. They didn't have no way of progressing because everybody that was in the school, it was just Anglos—teachers. They didn't have no Mexicans.

Berta told me that as a result of her activities, many "white people" in Naranjo City would not do business with Ángel and her. There weren't that many whites (i.e., non-Hispanics) living in Naranjo City, but according to Berta and Ángel, they controlled the town. "I didn't have no business here in my store with white people," she said. "Since I was involved in helping others, you know, white people usually stay away from people like you." Similarly, Ángel claimed that he had left the supermarket to start his own business because, as a Mexican, he would never get to be a full-fledged store manager. In addition to any money she might make from her business, it

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seemed that the ethnic solidarity Berta shared with Mexicans, along with her religious commitment to aiding the poor, played a significant role in the aid the Flores gave to migrants passing through Naranjo City.

MEXICAN AND CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS PASSING THROUGH NARANJO CITY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Mexican migrants have traveled to and through South Texas in large numbers since the beginning of the 20th century.² Through the 1960s, the farms and ranches of South Texas were one of the principal destinations of Mexicans on their work sojourns in the United States. With the mechanization of agriculture, demand for migrant labor in the Lower Rio Grande Valley diminished dramatically, so that by 1970 South Texas had gone from being a destination to a transit corridor for most Mexican migrants. By this time, however, so many Mexican migrants had settled in the region that migrants and their Spanish-speaking descendants constituted the vast majority of the local population, especially for those Texas counties located along the international boundary itself. Warren County's sociodemographic characteristics were typical for South Texas at the beginning of the 20th century. Of its approximately 30,000 residents, 8 percent were Hispanic, 14 percent were foreign born (almost all from Mexico), and 80 percent spoke a language other than English at home (almost all Spanish). The only urbanized place of any significance in the county was Naranjo City, which captured around half the county's population. Naranjo City was surrounded by largely unpopulated ranch and farmland, as indicated by the low population density of Warren County, with just 29 inhabitants per square mile.

In addition to the small population, Naranjo City and Warren County were unpromising destinations for labor migrants, given that median household income was just \$21,000 and nearly 35 percent of the population lived below the official poverty line, while comparable figures for the United States as a whole were \$41,994 and 12.4 percent, respectively. According to a journalist who worked in the region, the Warren County economy was in dire straits by the 1990s. Citrus had been a big agricultural crop requiring many laborers to harvest, but a freeze had killed it off. The jobs picture in the area worsened in the 1990s when a couple of factories were closed, costing 400 to 500 people their jobs. Crime and poverty were endemic problems in Naranjo City and its vicinity, according to this source, with drugs sold on street corners, significant incidence of property crimes and burglaries, a large proportion of the population receiving public

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assistance, and a steady brain drain as ambitious and qualified people left the area in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

Although contemporary Naranjo City was no longer attractive as a destination for Mexican labor migrants, it remained quite important as a staging area for undocumented migrants attempting to leave the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Naranjo City was the last significant human settlement migrants encountered as they left the relatively densely populated Lower Rio Grande Valley before entering the largely unpopulated ranchlands to the north. Undocumented Mexicans, once they had made it across the river, could travel relatively easily through the Lower Rio Grande Valley communities, which were numerous and densely populated with fellow Mexicans and Mexican Americans, until they got to Naranjo City. North of Naranjo City, migrants faced the most significant obstacle they would encounter on their journeys into the U.S. interior—getting past the immigration checkpoints staffed by the Border Patrol. In order to bypass these checkpoints, migrants would have to walk around them through miles of unforgiving brush. As a consequence of its location, Naranjo City became a prime layover point and staging ground for the next leg of migrants' journeys. Whether they were traveling on their own steam or being transported by coyotes, migrants would seek shelter, buy provisions, and make other needed arrangements in Naranjo City before heading further north.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, the volume of undocumented migrants passing through Naranjo City grew substantially. By the 1980s, repeated economic crises in Mexico combined with the growing Mexican migrant population in the United States brought ever more Mexicans across the border in a process of cumulative causation, in spite of the lack of legal opportunities for them to migrate. Added to this came the mass emigration of Central Americans due to warfare and the consequent displacement of thousands of citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many of whom were destined for Houston, Texas and Washington, DC, and followed the eastern corridor of Mexico to cross the border into South Texas. Finally, the crackdowns by the Border Patrol on undocumented crossings in El Paso in 1993 and in San Diego in 1994 pushed much of the flow from those two corridors east to the Northeast Mexico-South Texas corridor. This shift in the flow of migrants was reflected in the pattern of apprehensions along the border. As apprehensions fell in El Paso and San Diego, they rose dramatically in South Texas, growing from 234,000 in FY 1993 to 499,000 in FY 1997. In response to the increased "pressure" in South Texas, the Border Patrol

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launched Operation Rio Grande in Brownsville in the summer of 1997, dramatically increasing the number of agents engaging in “linewatch” along the riverbank in an effort to deflect crossings away from the urban areas at the border.³ Although the operation made the journey across the border and out of South Texas more arduous, migrants continued to come, in spite of the added effort and dangers implied by longer treks through the brush. It would not be until 2003 that apprehensions in the region dropped below their 1993 level. Another outcome of the Operation was dramatically increased reliance by migrants on coyotes to travel through the region. Where before the Operation, data from the *Encuesta de Migración Internacional en la Frontera Norte* indicated that just 21 percent of undocumented Mexican migrants had hired a coyote to cross the border, after the Operation was launched the figure rose to 50 percent.⁴ Thus, it was not surprising that by the second half of the 1990s a great surge of both migrants and coyotes were arriving in the little town of Naranjo City, Texas on their way north.

According to Berta Flores, Mexican migrants had been passing through Naranjo City ever since she was a young child. It was a routine thing for the town, she said, and migrants arrived at her business from the day she and her husband opened it:

Berta: People have come since I was two, that I remember. And they have been coming and they are going to keep coming. They will never stop people from coming. A lot of those people that are coming already have roots over here in Texas! And in New York and anywhere over here. And all those people want to bring their families ‘cause they’re living in starvation. In Mexico there’s no life for a lot of people!

Spener: But I imagine when you first opened the business, our customers were just neighborhood people.

Berta: But Mexican people were here all the time!

Spener: But how did that happen? How did people know you were here?

Berta: People just come. People knows everybody here in a little town. People tells each other. “You should come over here. You’ll find a room there. They’ll rent it for you.” It was just word of mouth.

In the 1970s, the Flores would rent rooms for as little as \$3 per night. They didn’t rent the rooms to make money, really, but mainly just to help out indigent migrants who needed a place to stay. She added, “Cause some

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people didn't have no shoes, no shirts, no nothing. How can you get something from somebody if they don't have it?" Perhaps another reason word got around about the Flores' place was Berta's home-cooked meals.

According to her family members, she was a wonderful cook and would work all day in the kitchen, making fresh tortillas and dozens of plates of food for her customers. As late as the 1990s, Berta would sell guests a whole plate of fresh-cooked food (tamales, beans, and rice) for as little as \$2.50.

Another reason that migrants in need of food and shelter wound up on the Flores' doorstep was the active role Berta and her family played in their parish church, located near the house. Starting in the 1980s, the church took on the task of tending to the many Central American migrants who began to pass through town fleeing wars in their homelands, as well as the growing stream of Mexicans heading north. One of the priests serving the church told me that word got out among migrants that the church would help them with food housing, clothing, access to showers and bathrooms, and even some limited medical treatment free of charge. Just as importantly, migrants could avoid capture by the Border Patrol in church buildings. The church became, he said, part of the migrants' Underground Railroad. One of the places that the church would put migrants up was the Flores' store and apartments. The priest I interviewed said "Any time I or any of the priests needed a place or needed a hot meal, or needed something done, I could just call the Flores family and they were taken care of. They fed and housed a lot of people." If migrants had no money, the church would give the Flores a stipend of U.S. \$12 for a night in one of their rooms and two meals. This continued right up until the time Berta, Ángel, and their children were arrested. Neither the church nor the Flores family would ever ask migrants their legal status or turn them away if migrants told them they had no papers. Not surprisingly, word got around among migrants about this. The priest summarized the situation as follows:

I was told one time by a guy in the Border Patrol that they sometimes would stop people that had a map with our church, our house, and places in Naranjo City for people to stop where they would get help. Not that they would do anything illegal, but people coming from Mexico and Central America had maps of our house, our churches, and places in Naranjo City where people would give help. ... They just knew that if they came here they would get food, shelter, and clothing or whatever it is they needed. ... And Berta was a one place stop and shop, you know what I mean? She took care of them, and literally if it was in the middle of the night would cook for them.

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By all accounts, the number of migrants funneling through Naranjo City grew dramatically in the mid-1990s, after the Border Patrol launched Operations Blockade and Gatekeeper on the western stretches of the border, diverting flows of migrants into the Northeast Mexico-South Texas corridor. An officer from the local sheriff's office said that there was suddenly "an abundance of immigrants, all over town" and that he encountered whole groups of them on the streets walking to and from the Flores' store, right past his office. "We were being overrun," he said. Although Naranjo City had always had migrants passing through, this amount of traffic was new.

The Border Patrol became aware of the situation. An agent who was involved in the investigation of the Flores family said that by 1997 agents were making 800 to 1,000 apprehensions a day in the corridor leading into Naranjo City. They came to recognize Naranjo City as a "choke point" or "bottleneck" leading away from the border. According to the agent, "Everything led to Naranjo City." He said that between Naranjo City and the nearest immigration checkpoint on the highway, "sign-cutting" crews were tracking groups of 70 to 100 migrants hiking through the brush to bypass the checkpoint. Local police complained to the Border Patrol, he said, of growing problems of loitering, along with public drunkenness and urination by migrant men in Naranjo City.

Members of the Flores' church found more migrants than ever arriving at their doorstep in search of help and also noticed that a greater number of them were being transported by coyotes than before. According to the priest quoted above, the church property began to be used by coyotes as a "dead-drop" for the vehicles they used to transport migrants:

They were leaving vehicles on our property. So that was clearly the work of *polleros* and *coyotes*. Apparently there were folks coming across the border that had gotten across the border and were to meet here at this property and pick up a vehicle. The dead drop meant that the keys were left in the vehicle. We knew it because we had so many different vehicles appearing on our property that we wound up reporting it because that would put everyone in trouble, because it was on our property. That went on for about four weeks, probably 10 to 15 different vehicles. So that was part of the transition.

He also said that the coyotes began to take advantage of the good will of both the church and the Flores family:

They set [the Flores] up, and they set the church up. I mean we knew coyotes were using us, because literally, I had a guy come

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and ask for buckets to be filled with water. And I said, "Well why are you here?" And he says, "Well because we're being run and where we're staying at they're not giving us any food or water." So they came to our property and were filling cans with water and carrying cans of water. And then the next day they'd be sent by the guy, who I knew, and I moseyed down over there and found there were quite a few people there. This took place nearby. This coyote was sending people to us to feed and clothe them. So I went and talked to him. I couldn't believe how many people were there! [in a house near the church]. I told him, "You want to run people, you want to put their lives in danger, *you* feed them!" Since obviously he was getting something out of it.

Ángel Flores also described growing numbers of coyotes coming to his place to rent rooms by the mid 1990s:

The coyotes would bring them. They'd just show up and see if we had any place for them to stay. This went on for two or three years after '96. We'd be asleep at night and people would come in and say they knew the place. They'd start coming in pickups or vans and they would pile them up in the houses or rooms that we had without me even knowing it! It got so bad that it got out of control, you know! We didn't even know ourselves that people were coming in bunches. By '98 we couldn't control nothing because people were coming in vans and trucks and cars and sometimes they would just get in the rooms without us even knowing. ... There was just so many of them! Coyotes from Houston, from Matamoros, from Central America, that would come over. It was really out of control at the end there!

Berta said that one of the main reasons that coyotes and their migrants came to their place was because they knew that the Flores would not report them to the authorities:

They were coming in cars full of people and they would order a lot of food! Because, if you go to a *Whataburger*⁵ and some of these places and they see you ordering food, they call the cops to see why people are getting so much food. So they used to come here a lot and they would order food and take it back to the rooms. That's what they wanted from me. Immigration wanted me to rent the room and then call them! That they were already renting here! How could I do that? ... Why should I do that to my own people? I'm not that type of people! They would come to the store. They would tell me, "I need a room for three people."

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Or four people, or five. And I would tell them where the room was. I didn't even go to the room. There was people that didn't even pay, they didn't even check in. I was so busy working and selling food that a lot of time I didn't get to go and check the rooms.

Some people in Naranjo City knew that the Flores family had been taking in migrants for years, ever since they had gone into business. By the mid-1990s, nearly everyone in town seemed to know about the role of the Flores store and apartments as a layover stop for migrants heading north. It had become "an open secret." After the Border Patrol identified Naranjo City as a "chokepoint", it assigned a task force of about 30 agents to the town to monitor conditions and apprehend migrants and arrest coyotes bringing people into and out of town. They set up a toll-free number for residents to call to report suspicious activity. Agents attempted to develop relations with the local community to get more information about what was going on in the town. The parish priest complained that the Border Patrol was overly aggressive in taking action in Naranjo City.

They had Border Patrol everywhere in Naranjo City. And this street, you just came down our street, they'd be driving 70 miles per hour down here heading towards [the Flores store]. We'd always see them fly by, and at high speeds, and with no lights or anything. And then one time I was driving to visit somebody who was sick and they were armed out on the street all around the place, which was like a DMZ, which really seemed to me to be overkill. And it really put kids in the schools near our church in danger.

Although the Flores store was the most obvious place in town where migrants were laying over before heading towards the checkpoint, there were many other places where migrants were being housed by coyotes coming through town. A Border Patrol agent recalled a situation in which he arrested a group of "aliens" following a tip received on the 800 number that had been set up:

The 800 number would get redirected to our cell phones. And I got a call one time that says this lady and these two sisters just came and they bought a hundred hamburgers and a hundred fries. And they're having a party? No, they're putting the bags in through a broken window, handing them to somebody. At the abandoned factory. An alley in the back. We sent some agents and there were 60 to 70 aliens inside that abandoned building with the rest of the hamburgers waiting for the other people to arrive. It generated calls like that.

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Following a tip they received from a local informant, Border Patrol agents headed to the Flores store. As an agent spoke with Berta in the bar area, other agents outside began to see people running into the rooms to hide. One of the agents described the scene as follows:

There were people running all over the place. Running inside houses, inside rooms. We had an apartment on the outside, but it was all a bunch of rooms on the inside. There were maybe a hundred people inside that thing. It was unbelievable to me! So we went inside this place with agents on the outside guarding the doors. As soon as you got to the door, you felt the heat, the body heat, and you smelt the body odor. Maybe a hundred people crammed into this place! You walked in, they were apartments that were for rent, mattresses on the floor, couches with holes, there is no coffee tables, nothing else, one working bathroom for all those people. You had used toilet paper stacked up this high next to the bathroom. Women, kids, babies, they were just soaking wet, because someone had locked them in from the outside with a padlock. You would see loads of bread, baloney, and jugs of water. They would throw the food in and then lock the door from the outside. The apartments across the streets, there, you couldn't get out. We had to break the door just to get in. Every single one of the apartments were full. You had cars parked in the driveway, people in them, laying down in plain view, in the cars.

After this incident, it was politically impossible for the Border Patrol to turn a blind eye to the situation at the Flores store and apartments. An officer with the Warren County sheriff's department told me, "It was so much, it had to collapse." Ángel Flores himself, in retrospect, said "The government had to do something, I guess," but he and Berta, as well as some of their allies at the church did not believe that going after the Flores business as a criminal enterprise was the right thing to do.

The Border Patrol did not have enough evidence to prosecute the Flores for "harboring and transporting" violations, however, since it could not come up with any migrants as material witnesses who would testify in court that members of the family knew that they were in the country illegally and were being transported by coyotes. The reason for this was that it was not the migrants who were actually negotiating the rental of rooms and the purchasing of food face-to-face with members of members of the Flores family. Rather, it was the coyotes that brought them to stay on the premises and made all arrangements with the Flores. It would take a lengthy undercover investigation for the government to establish that the

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Flores were actively and knowingly colluding with the coyotes before it would be able to successfully prosecute them.

THE ROLES PLAYED (AND NOT PLAYED) BY THE FLORES FAMILY IN THE MIGRATION PROCESS

The press and the authorities portrayed the arrest of the Flores and their associates as the breaking up of one of the largest organized “alien smuggling” operations that they had ever encountered in South Texas. Berta Flores was characterized not only as the matriarch of the family and its business but also as the “mastermind” and “godmother” of a major smuggling operation that had been active for over a decade and had been responsible for the smuggling of thousands of “illegal aliens” out of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The judge that sentenced Mrs. Flores viewed her as heading a lucrative illegal business. Although no cash assets or investments were ever located and seized by the government, the authorities were suspicious that the Flores had money hidden somewhere, given the number of migrants they had served over the years and the significant amounts of money that migrants were paying to their coyotes, as much as \$900 per person (in 2008 dollars). Berta Flores, however, steadfastly maintained that she was doing nothing illegal, even after having completed her prison sentence. In her view, her business was selling groceries, renting rooms, and cooking food for her customers. It was not her responsibility to check the immigration status of her customers any more than was the case for any other restaurant or motel in the region, all of whom, she insisted, also routinely rented rooms and sold food to undocumented migrants and the people who transported them.

The Border Patrol brought the FBI and the IRS into the investigation. They hired undercover informants wearing wires to get inside information from the Flores about their business. They conducted video surveillance of the premises to monitor the comings and goings of the Flores, their employees, and their customers. On several occasions, they also used agents posing as coyotes to pick up groups of migrants from other coyotes at the river and drive them to the Flores establishment where they rented rooms and purchased food for them. The objective of the investigation, according to one of the FBI agents involved, was the following:

We wanted to prove that somebody, a smuggler, would come to them and say, “I’ve got X amount of people and I need a place to put them, and they are illegal aliens” and for that service they would be paid. So that was the goal of the undercover objective.

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And in doing that we met the standard of harboring, they were active participants, not just people providing rooms. They were physically controlling the harboring. And they knew what they were doing. And through our investigation we were able to establish that.

The agent said that in the course of the investigation, the team was able to document welfare fraud, money laundering, and identification fraud violations by the Flores and their employees. The infractions the FBI uncovered were not as grandiose as they might sound at first blush. The welfare fraud consisted of the defendants purchasing food stamps⁶ at 50 cents to the dollar from their designated recipients and using them to buy groceries to resell in their store. This, the FBI agent explained to me, constituted both welfare fraud and money laundering. The ID fraud, the agent said, consisted of the Flores buying Social Security cards and birth certificates and selling them to migrants for several hundred dollars a set. The investigation was able to establish this by having a collaborator sell such documents to the Flores that investigators were later able to recover on the premises. The agent said that the Flores were involved in wire fraud insofar as they would accept payment for lodging and food provided by having their coyote-customers wire it to them from places like Houston and North Carolina.⁷

According to members of the Flores family, the accusation of identity fraud was not true. One of the daughters claimed that prosecutors brought this and the welfare fraud and money-laundering charges in order to pressure her mother Berta, who continued to insist on her innocence, to plead guilty. The daughter had this to say about the identify fraud charge in particular:

She knew everybody's transactions that were going on and one of the charges that they had on her was her selling Social Securities. Papers. Well, she knew who to send you to. She knew who was dealing the bad things. So, she would say, "Go with that guy. He'll take care of you. He knows what to do. That's what he does." Well, in her charges, when they arrested her, they put that she was responsible for Social Securities. For selling fake Social Security cards. And the charges were so elaborate and they had already done the investigation and they had their case. And so, here, they're saying all these things and you're going to have to fight against them. When we went to the attorney, the attorney goes "Well, you're going to have to spend lots more money than you've already spent so that we can fight against what the government is saying."

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One thing the Flores family, their friends around town, and the law enforcement authorities agreed about with regard to the family business was that their “rates” were quite cheap. The FBI agent said that the family would only charge \$10 to \$15 dollars a person a day for a place to sleep and two hot meals. It was, he said, “a volume business.” Another source who was familiar with the case concurred with this agent’s assessment. The source thought that the Flores place generated a great deal more revenue than a typical “mom & pop” store would, perhaps as much as \$200,000 a year at its peak, but that did not mean the Flores were getting rich. Rather, they plowed most of the money they were making back into their business.

Another thing that was clear was that whatever the Flores knew about how the migrants they lodged and fed had arrived at their door, the Flores themselves were not, in fact, “running” a “smuggling ring” or a “smuggling operation.” They did not actively recruit migrant customers, make arrangements for their transportation to and from the border, nor did they effect migrants’ unlawful entry of the United States. The Flores did not direct any set of coyotes in their employ nor were they under the direction of any organized criminal “syndicate.” Their businesses was owned and directed by their family alone and consisted primarily, if not exclusively, of the renting of lodging, the selling of food, and running a small pool hall that served beer on the premises. The Flores family did not appear to actively seek out either migrants or coyotes as customers, even as their business became increasingly dependent upon them in the latter half of the 1990s as the migratory flow through Naranjo City grew precipitously. Moreover, it appeared that many different sets of coyotes availed themselves of the services offered by the Flores family leading up to the time of their arrest. In other words, in spite of the large number of migrants that had been apprehended on their premises, the Flores business did not, in fact, consist of a single, integrated, large-scale “human smuggling” organization. They were, rather, one of many independent participants in a far-flung network of individuals and groups that facilitated the migration of Mexicans and Central Americans into the United States.⁸

If the Flores business was not a large-scale, tightly-integrated “smuggling” organization, what explains the very large number of migrants apprehended on their premises. Reading between the lines of the transcripts of interviews with a number of informants leads to the following explanation. As noted above, Naranjo City, Texas represented a “choke point” or “bottleneck” in the Northeast Mexico-South Texas migratory corridor. It was the last place for migrants and their coyotes to regroup before the immigration checkpoints further up the road. The next leg of the

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journey was the most crucial and problematic, since it typically involved migrants being marched through the forbidding brush country around the checkpoints before being picked up on the other side by vehicles arranged by their coyotes. Once past the checkpoints, migrants were unlikely to be apprehended by the Border Patrol as they were driven further into Texas. Rather than indicating a large-scale operation moving large numbers of migrants, it seems more likely that a number of different coyotes continued to arrive in Naranjo City with new loads of migrants before they were able to move migrants already housed with the Flores beyond the immigration checkpoints. It wouldn't take long for the Flores apartments and outbuildings to be filled to bursting as migrants continued to arrive by the carload over the course of several days. Something similar appears to have happened in May 2003 in the tragic deaths of 19 migrants in the back of a tractor trailer rig loaded with 75 to 100 people brought across the border by a number of different coyotes who contracted with a woman in Harlingen, Texas for the provision of the truck to carry their customers out of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.⁹ In other words, the very lack of coordination and organization of the transport of migrants by a single enterprise may be responsible for the large number of migrants housed with the Flores, rather than a large-scale, tightly-integrated operation under a unified command.

THE DISCOURSE OF COYOTE-ASSISTED CLANDESTINE BORDER-CROSSING

The rhetoric employed by agents of the state with regard to coyote-assisted clandestine border-crossings is overwhelmingly negative and this rhetoric is largely reproduced uncritically by the news media. Agents of the state typically describe the service provided by coyotes as an organized crime phenomenon, emphasizing its illegality and the exploitation and victimization of migrants by their "smugglers" or "traffickers." At the same time, Border Patrol agents tend to describe themselves as the protectors and rescuers of migrants, ignoring their own role in creating conditions that place migrants at risk and render them vulnerable to abuse.¹⁰ Much of what was written in the press about the Flores and said by law enforcement agents was consistent with the general rhetoric about coyotes from government sources. For example, a local law enforcement officer in Naranjo City said that "it's just wrong" for "smugglers" to "take advantage of migrants, either monetarily, physically or sexually or whatever." Such people, he said, "need to get put away." A Border Patrol agent said that it was hard for anyone to understand how "alien smugglers" could be "actually thriving on somebody else's misery, misfortunes, somebody being

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poor, indigenous, and illiterate. It's just hard. How could you do something like that?" One of the FBI agents who investigated the Flores' business said he believed that "alien smugglers" were even more morally reprehensible than drug traffickers:

The people that are involved in alien smuggling, I believe are the worst exploiters of other individuals. Even more so than drug traffickers. Obviously drug traffickers put their product out on the street, but they don't necessarily have direct involvement other than the sale between one person and another, and they don't necessarily see the direct result. But these individuals bring them into their facilities, and exploit them from that minute on, until they're moved on. So when people say their doing nothing more than trying to help them, get them into the United States, well, I don't believe that because it's all a profit-based motive and they do nothing to make their life better at all.

The attitude taken towards the Flores by these law enforcement agents was strongly influenced by the conditions they found on the family's premises at the time of the initial mass apprehension of migrants and their subsequent arrest. For example, the FBI agent quoted immediately above had the following to say about the conditions he encountered at the time of the Flores' arrest:

It was horrible...They would be forced to live in these tiny little apartments where they would have 20 people in a little room. And there would be a mattress and they wouldn't have any furniture. There would be typically no running water or toilet facilities. There would be an unusable toilet that everybody would use and so the human waste would build up. They would never clean. It was just a mess. They would send their minions to provide the food, but one of the problems that we discovered in talking to some of the people was that if a coyote came in, some of the ones they dealt with on a regular basis, they would give him credit basically, so they would allow him to put their people in the room and pay later. Well, if they didn't pay, they would basically lock the aliens in the room. They would come in and put a padlock on the outside of the room so those aliens were locked inside. You can imagine! Sometimes they were inside there for days! If the smuggler didn't pay for the food, the Flores wouldn't feed them. So these people would be in there with no food or water as well. There had been reports of physical and sexual abuse amongst the aliens, because they would commingle men, women, and children in some of these rooms. We were never able to document or prove that, but there were constant rumors circulating about younger women being sexually abused while they were locked in these rooms.

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Although the apartments in which migrants stayed were razed around the time the Flores went to prison, videotapes of the apartments were taken by the authorities as part of their investigation. The tapes showed a number of small rooms, some of them dirty and quite run down. One cement block room was empty except for a bare mattress on the floor with a pair of men's pants laid across it. The shower and the toilet attached to the room were dirty and stained. A box of used toilet paper was next to the toilet. A handwritten note on the wall asked, in Spanish, for any leaks to be reported to the management. Another small, dark room had a bed with dirty sheets on it. Some of the rooms had curtains that appeared to be made of old sheets nailed to the walls. Other rooms looked a bit brighter and cleaner, and one had a television in it. In that room, a cardboard tray lay on a mattress and was filled with styrofoam, carry-out food containers, with a gallon-jug of water next to it and a can of soda sitting on the floor. Other rooms also had similar carry-out food debris in them. Under the sink in one of the apartments dozens of empty gallon milk jugs could be seen, presumably to be used to carry water as migrants walked through the brush around the immigration checkpoints on the next leg of their journey. An agent in the video said to the camera that "dope" had been found in one of the rooms and in another scene showed a plastic zip-loc baggie partially filled with what appeared to be a small amount of marijuana. Most of the rooms did not appear to be heated or cooled, although one room did have a window-unit air conditioner in it. Graffiti on the wall of one room appeared below a decal of Jesus and another of the Mexican flag. It read "Rudi Serrano, José Huerta, Costa Chica," indicating that migrants from that Pacific Coast region of the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca had stayed there. Graffiti in another room said "Chapines, Guatemala, VIVA." The conditions depicted in the video, while they certainly looked grimy and uncomfortable, did not appear to be intrinsically unsanitary or inhumane. Much would depend on the number of people in each room, the outdoor temperature, the length of time people would stay in them, and how often they were cleaned. Nevertheless, conditions were certainly far worse than those that would be found in even the shabbiest of motels in the United States.

The parish priest was not especially concerned about bad conditions at the Flores place. The church continued to refer migrants to the Flores right up to the time they were shut down. Conditions were not great, he acknowledged, but he did not believe they were dangerous, either, especially relative to the alternatives available to migrants in Naranjo City:

Berta's was better than sleeping in the streets. There were a large number of migrants during the winter, so getting them out of the

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rain and bad weather was more critical. ... It was a way we could afford to help more people. We knew they were getting a good hot meal. That was the most important thing. It was better than them sleeping out in the rain, which they did, or on the railroad tracks, which they also did.

He went on to point out that people staying with the Flores did not typically stay very long in the rooms. Most people, he said, moved on quickly, so sleeping on the floor for a night or two was not that bad. In the priest's opinion, Berta Flores, rather than being the "mastermind" of a criminal enterprise, was a good-hearted Christian who took care of people regardless of their circumstances. An additional illustration of this, he said, was that when Berta was arrested, one of her biggest concerns was that a street person that had been staying with her would be taken care of by the local sheriffs. The priest believed that Berta Flores and her family were made into scapegoats for failed U.S. immigration policies. He argued that the Flores family was no more culpable of aiding migrants than he himself was.

Another source familiar with the Flores case believed that Berta and Ángel had probably never made a conscious decision to "cross the line" and actively collude with coyotes to profit from the migrant traffic through Naranjo City. Rather, they continued to provide the services they always provided, and for very low prices—as little as \$5 per person per night and \$2 to \$4 for a plate of hot food. Their services to migrants had long been an open secret in Naranjo City and the Flores made no serious effort to hide what they were doing. Berta and the rest of the family members were aware of the fact that they were being investigated by the authorities. Ángel and other family members thought they should desist from renting rooms to people they knew or suspected were in the country illegally, but Berta steadfastly refused, always arguing that they were not doing anything wrong. Some people around town believed that after the first mass arrest, Berta was "in denial" about the legal jeopardy she was placing her family in.

Surprisingly, the F.B.I. agent quoted above also believed that Berta Flores and her family had begun to aid migrants for all the right reasons and had only later become what he regarded as a criminal enterprise:

I would say that they got involved for good reasons, that they believed they were just trying to help people out. That was their initial interest. Because they saw the plight of these people, they probably did it for the humanitarian purposes in the beginning. They were truly genuine in their desires to help the people. Then it went from there, unfortunately, to the business that it became.

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I think it just evolved over the years. I probably would say they were trying to do the right thing. It was an eye opener for me. And you see the plight of these people, and you sympathize with them, you almost want to turn the other way, and let them do what they're trying to do, but you know you can't. I think there's a lot of people in the business that truly do want to help them, but when it becomes bastardized to the point it did with them it becomes a problem obviously. It's illegal obviously.

GIVING THE LAST WORD TO THE MATRIARCH

After serving several years in prison, Berta Flores still maintained that she had done nothing wrong, even though she had been convicted of a crime and harshly punished for it. In spite of what the papers had said, Berta insisted that she never had been a smuggler: "Whatever they put in the paper, it wasn't nothing true, because I was not smuggling. I *did* help [the migrants] and I don't feel sorry that I did help them because those are my people." When I asked her what her impression was of the coyotes that had brought people to her business, she said that she thought of the coyotes and the migrants as being the same group of people—fellow Mexicans, like her. At the same time she insisted that she had no knowledge of the coyotes' business: "My impression was that [both the migrants and the coyotes] were my brothers and I was there to help them. My business was just to rent and sell here. What the coyotes did, what they had in their cars, I had no knowledge."

In South Texas, Berta argued, she was not alone in her willingness to help migrants out even at considerable risk to herself. "Some people will take you," she said, "even though it's hard and they might go to prison. And some people don't do it for money. They do it because they *care* for you! There's a lot that do it for money, but there's a lot that do it because they care for you." She denied that she or anyone in her family had ever locked anyone in a room, as the prosecution had claimed. Rather, she and Ángel pointed out that the government had detained several migrants as material witnesses to testify against them in court and that none of them ever testified that they had been mistreated while staying on the Flores premises. Berta said she had known that she was being investigated but was never afraid of going to jail for running her business the way she had. She firmly believed that she had nothing to be afraid of because she was not doing anything wrong by providing services to migrants. Her religious convictions also allowed her to continue to do what she regarded as being the right thing, in spite of any risks she faced by doing so. "I believe in the

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Holy Spirit,” she told me, and I believe that I’m here to help others. I wasn’t ever afraid. And I don’t regret what I did. ... God lives in my heart. And if he wants me to do something, I’m going to do it.” Then she added, “If I get in trouble for doing good, I have to pay the price. That’s all I can tell you.”

At the same time, Berta Flores, who identified herself as *mucha parte mexicana*, believed that the evil in the situation she had lived could be found in the laws of the United States. When I asked her what she thought about U.S. immigration policy, she told me she thought it was “very wrong”:

Why can’t people come without hiring somebody and putting up all their money? And dying on the way just because the law says they can’t come over here? People come, leaving everything behind! I feel very bad about this. ... There’s a lot of laws that needs to be changed. I believe that if you’re doing it for drugs and all that—that’s wrong! But just for coming? For people coming across? And getting killed and getting shot by these people that have the power and control? I think that these laws are *demoníacos* [demonic, evil]. And it’s going to be like this from now on. There’s no heart. There’s no feelings. There’s nothing any more! There’s no remorse for anybody. If you have it, and if another doesn’t, that’s okay. As long as you have it, you don’t care about your brother that needs you.

It seems, then, that Berta Flores, the fallen smuggling “mastermind,” saw herself not as a criminal, but rather as her brother’s keeper.

CHAPTER 9

Sandra, in San Antonio, on Her Way to Seattle

Sandra was a 21-year-old mother who lived in poverty with her three children in the northern border city of Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Her husband, a maquiladora worker, had a foul temper and a drinking problem. He routinely beat her and abused her emotionally. Fearing for her safety, her mother and father, who had gone to live in Seattle, Washington, convinced her to flee her husband and join them in the United States. They set her up with the same coyotes that had brought her mother across the border a year earlier. I interviewed Sandra in her aunt's house in San Antonio in 2004 a few days after coyotes had brought her and her three-year-old son across the border. It had been a harrowing trip, but she and her son had arrived safe and sound. She was waiting for another relative to come to drive her to Seattle, a couple of thousand miles away, to reunite with her parents. She was worried about how she was going to wrest her other two children away from their abusive father.

I was introduced to Doña Anita¹ by a member of her parish church on the West Side of San Antonio who knew that I was writing a book about the border-crossing experiences of undocumented immigrants. Most of the parishioners of her church were Mexican like her and lived in the surrounding working-class neighborhood. Anita was 39 years old when I interviewed her in 2004. She and her husband had gotten married sixteen years earlier in Piedras Negras, where they both had grown up. They first came to live in United States in 1989, using fake border crossing cards to enter. Anita was pregnant when they arrived, and she gave birth to her daughter in Dallas shortly after. Her husband got work in a car wash but was arrested in an immigration raid a few months later and was deported back to Mexico. She stayed on a few more months with her baby, but then had to go back to Piedras because she had no money to pay the bills without her husband there working. They remained in Mexico for another couple of years and had two more children there. Later, she and her husband were able to get real border crossing cards based on his steady employment in a factory in Piedras Negras. They couldn't make a go of it on his meager salary, though, and decided to try their luck again in the United States, using

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their *micas* [the Mexican slang term for the border crossing card] to enter. This time they went to San Antonio because it was the closest major city to the border. They didn't know anyone living there at that time, in the early 1990s. Her husband got a job working in construction, earning \$250 to \$300 per week.

Anita and her husband settled permanently in San Antonio. He continued to work in construction. They now lived in a dilapidated rental home on a quiet residential street. They felt lucky not to have had any more run-ins with immigration, since down the block there was a laundromat where some young men had recently been picked up and deported in an unexpected raid. The presence of *la migra* in their neighborhood was palpable, Anita said, and it made residents fearful:

They were roving the streets for a while last year. I was afraid to walk my kids to school. There are times we don't even send the kids to school, so we don't have to go out in public. It's like they've got us surrounded. We feel like we're in prison here because we can never feel comfortable anywhere we go. And if they catch us, it's the kids who really suffer. That's what happened with a friend of mine just the other day. She was at the laundromat when it was raided by *la migra*. They arrested and deported her. They arrested her little girl, too, and they held her until another family member could come get her.

Anita had relatives living in other parts of the United States further from the border. In particular, she had a sister who was living with her husband in Seattle, Washington. The sister had just sent for her 21-year-old daughter and three-year-old grandson to join them and had asked Anita to put them up in San Antonio for a few nights until she could send another relative to pick them up and drive them to Seattle. The two had made it to Anita's house a couple of days earlier, having crossed the border through Laredo with a band of coyotes based in Coahuila. They were still there the day I went to talk with Anita about her own experiences. She asked if I would also like to speak with her niece, Sandra, about how the crossing had gone. When I said yes, of course, she went to a back room of the house to see if Sandra was awake and willing to talk. Anita came back and said Sandra would be happy to talk with me and that she would be out in a few minutes. While we waited, Anita explained to me that Sandra's parents had convinced her to join them in Seattle in order to get away from her abusive husband in Piedras Negras. They had set Sandra up with the same coyotes that had brought her mother across a year earlier. A few minutes later, Sandra came out and started to tell me how she came to be sitting with me in her aunt's living room that day.

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WHY SANDRA HAD TO LEAVE MEXICO

Sandra was from a rancho in the east-central part of the state of Coahuila near the town of Peñasco. According to Sandra, there wasn't much in her rancho, "ni agua ni nada" [no water or anything], and it was poor. The only paying work to be had was in a maquiladora assembly plant in Peñasco. Both her parents had worked there when she was growing up. Sandra had completed *la secundaria* [the equivalent of the 9th grade in the United States] before dropping out of school and going to work, first in local stores in Peñasco and later in a maquiladora in Piedras Negras. She met her husband working at the maquiladora when she was just eighteen. She got pregnant almost right away and got married shortly after giving birth to her son, José Raúl. Her relationship with her husband was conflictive and their relationship only lasted about two years before she left him. That was enough time for her to give birth to another child and get pregnant once more before she and her husband separated. Her two other children were two years and seven months old, respectively, at the time I interviewed her. Fearing her husband's violent temper, Sandra returned to Peñasco to stay with relatives to decide what to do next. She brought José Raúl with her but had to leave her two younger children with their father, who refused to relinquish custody of them. By this time, both her father and mother had left Peñasco and were living and working in Seattle, her father as a brick mason and her mother as a hotel housekeeper. Five of her father's brothers were also living and working there. Given that she had no money and no way of supporting herself in either Peñasco or Piedras Negras, her parents encouraged her to join them in Seattle. If she could get a job there and save up some money, perhaps she could hire a lawyer to get custody of her other two children. Her decision was one that many people from the *rancho* near Peñasco had made over the years. About as many members of her community lived in various locales in the United States as still lived around Peñasco itself.

CHOOSING A COYOTE TO MAKE THE TRIP

Sandra's father had been able to cross the border without problems three years earlier with a valid *mica* that had since expired. Her mother had a much harder time entering the United States since she had no valid crossing documents. She had first tried to cross the border with a group of coyotes in Piedras Negras, paying them U.S. \$1,800 at the beginning of the trip. After crossing the river, her mother had to hike through the brush for a whole day before getting arrested by the Border Patrol and sent back across the international bridge to Piedras. Having paid the \$1,800 fee ahead of

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time, she was supposed to be able to keep trying to cross with the same coyotes until she got through. Unfortunately, when she went looking for their leader, he was nowhere to be found. By then, she was in no condition to make a second attempt immediately and had no way of recovering the money she had lost. Like her daughter a year or so later, she returned to the rancho near Peñasco to decide what to do next.

One of Sandra's father's brothers in Seattle recommended another coyote to the couple. This man set people from Peñasco up with his collaborators in Nuevo Laredo, who took them across the border and onward to San Antonio. These coyotes charged migrants \$2,000 for the trip, in two payments, half up front and the remainder upon arrival in San Antonio. Things had gone very easily for her mother on this second trip and she made it to San Antonio and then on to Seattle without incident. Sandra had the following to say about her mother's experience with these coyotes:

She said that it had gone well for her. She hadn't had to walk at all. It had been real easy. She said I should go with then too, since she hadn't had to walk at all. She was afraid at first, given what had happened the first time she tried to cross. She really didn't want to come. My father just told her let's give it a try to see how it goes, and thank God, it was easy this time! She felt real good about them because she hadn't had to walk at all. My mother says they took her across the river, took her to a *rancho* and a tractor-trailer rig came to pick them up at the *rancho*. She says that she left Peñasco at three in the morning and made it to San Antonio that very same night.

Moreover, many other Peñasco residents had traveled to Texas with these coyotes and also recommended them.

The two quite opposite types of experiences her sister had with coyotes, along with other varied experiences that people in San Antonio had had, seemed to have influenced Sandra's Tía Anita's view of coyotes and how they operated. Before introducing me to Sandra, Doña Anita had told me that she had heard about the border-crossing experiences of a lot of friends and that "sometimes they make it with no problem, sometimes the coyotes are *muy malos* [awful] and sometimes they are *buenas gentes* [good guys]." "It just depends," she said, "on which kind you wind up with." Sometimes, even, things could turn out very differently for different people making different trips with the same coyotes. As it turned out, although Sandra's mother *no batalló nada* [hadn't struggled/suffered at all] on her trip with these coyotes, Anita said that Sandra had arrived three days ago with her feet all blistered and her legs and arms scratched and full of thorns, scared to death of the rattlesnakes she'd seen while hiking through the brush.

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SANDRA AND JOSÉ RAÚL'S 24-HOUR ODYSSEY FROM PEÑASCO TO SAN ANTONIO

Sandra was still trying to make sense of the trip she had just made when I interviewed her in San Antonio. It was confusing and things had not gone the way she had been told they would. For one thing, she had been told that she and her son weren't going to have to walk at all, when, in fact, she had to walk a long way through very rough country. Worse still, because her son could not make such a hike and neither she nor anyone else would be able to carry him, the coyotes separated the two of them and took her son across the bridge into Texas in a car filled with Mexican American children. In response to my first question about how the trip had gone, she blurted out the following:

The first coyote took us from Peñasco to Laredo. Then he delivers us to another coyote, who turns us over to another coyote who has some *muchachillos* [kids], 16 or 17-year-olds, take us across the river in *cámaras* [inner tubes]. Then they take us to a house, and then they deliver us to another person who loads us into a tractor-trailer. Then this person takes us to another person who walks us around the *garita* [the immigration checkpoint]. We walked from eleven o'clock at night until four in the morning. And then from there yet another person gives us to another person in another tractor trailer to get to San Antonio, where they drop us off at a hotel. When we were in Nuevo Laredo, they said that we weren't going to have to walk at all. We were just going to cross the river, walk a couple of blocks, and that would be it. And then we arrived at the house on this side in Laredo, Texas, and the lady there said, no, we were going to have to walk for about four hours. But it was more like five! And they don't let you rest—it's just walk and walk the whole night long.²

Continuing the conversation and asking a series of follow-up questions, I learned that there had been about thirty people in the group she traveled with, including nine Brazilian men. Sandra and her fellow Mexicans were charged U.S. \$2,000 each, paid in three installments--\$100 upon leaving Peñasco, another \$900 upon arriving in Laredo, Texas, and the remaining \$1,000 upon arrival at the hotel in San Antonio. Sandra's uncle in Seattle, the same one who had arranged for her mother's trip, wired the money to the coyotes at each step along the way. The Brazilians, she said, had been charged a great deal more than she and the other Mexicans in the group had paid. One of the things I wanted to know was why people from Peñasco, Coahuila traveled all the way to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas to cross into Texas, when Ciudad Acuña and Piedras Negras, Coahuila were much closer.

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Spener: Don't a lot of people from Peñasco cross through Piedras Negras?

Sandra: The thing is that in Piedras there's a lot of immigration [on the Texas side] and there are a lot of police along the river on the Piedras side. That's why we all go through Laredo.

Spener: What about Acuña?

Sandra: Well, who knows? I imagine it's the same story, but I'm not sure. The *muchacho* that took us from Peñasco to Laredo said that almost everyone was going through Laredo and Juárez, but that Juárez was more dangerous and it took them longer to cross people there because they're under more surveillance there [*los checan más*].

Sandra said that neither she nor her son had been mistreated physically by anyone on their trip. She did not seem to be traumatized in any way when I interviewed her. She seemed fairly at ease, given the circumstances, and spoke animatedly. I was relieved to hear that the men on the trip had left her alone, for she was young, slender, and pretty, and I had read numerous journalistic reports of women being abused and raped as they came across the border. Like many women who cross the border clandestinely, Sandra made this trip accompanied by an adult male relative—one of her uncles, in this case—and also benefited from the fact that there were other people on the trip from Peñasco that she knew. Still, she said that she was scared while she was making the trip, trusting no one, especially when she learned that the coyotes planned to separate her from little José Raúl. Had she known this, she would never have brought him with her:

When we got to Nuevo Laredo, they told me that I couldn't bring my son with me, that he couldn't walk with me, and that I had to leave him there with them. And I didn't trust them. I said, "How am I going to leave my son with people I've never even met before?" And they told me, "You have to leave him with us because you're going to walk and he's not going to be able to walk." And I said, "How am I going to leave him here if I don't know if you're really going to take him across and give him back to me or not?" And, well, they said, "Look, you just have to trust us." So I left him there and they didn't give him back to me until the next afternoon. They took him across the bridge with false papers. Some woman with a bunch of their own kids. We dropped my son off at her house.

After leaving her son with the woman who would take him across, Sandra, her uncle, and about a half-dozen other migrants were driven in a

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car by some men to a spot along a highway near the river, where they were left with some *muchachos* who would take them across on inner tubes. They were still in town, just not right by the downtown bridges that connected Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas with Laredo, Texas. They had to run across a busy highway dodging the on-coming traffic. The men were in communication by cell phone with their wives, who were stationed at some other vantage point along the river where they could observe the movements of Border Patrol vehicles on the opposite bank. While they were waiting, the teen-agers got high smoking a few joints. Another young woman was in Sandra's group and both were worried about crossing the river with these stoned teen-aged boys:

At the river you're wondering if you're going to drown with these teen-agers who were drugged-out. The other girl and I were scared. What if they drowned and left us there, or something like that? And we were real surprised by something. We asked them why they couldn't take across another other stretch of the river we'd seen on the way there, where there were rocks and we could have walked across. And one of them said, "No, we can't cross there because it doesn't belong to us. Everyone has their own little spot" [*cada uno tiene su terrenito*].

When the women saw that a post along the river had been vacated, they called the men and gave them the "all clear" to cross.³ At that point they jumped into the river on their inner tubes and the teens pulled them across, swimming alongside them.

As soon as we made it across the river we ran, I don't know, about four blocks to a bunch of houses. Some other *muchachos* were waiting for us there with their car. And they wanted to charge us more money! They said, "We can take you, but you have to pay us," and I don't know what all. And the *muchachos* that took us across the river told them, "No, they've already paid. Take them to the *señora*!" So they take us to the parking lot of this supermarket and a lady comes for us. She's real mad at the guys, and she says "What do these *pinches mexicanos* [fucking Mexicans] think they're doing?" Then they argue for a minute before she loads us up in her car and takes us to her house.⁴ When we got there, she let us take showers and wash our clothes, and fed us. She treated us well.

According to Sandra, this woman worked with another woman and they appeared to be the leaders of this band of coyotes was headed by women she met: *¡Las jefas son puras mujeres!* [The bosses are all women!]. Moreover, she took them to be *gringas*, since they didn't speak Spanish very well and their children didn't seem to speak or understand it all.

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Spener: How did you know they were the *jefas*?

Sandra: Well, because they were the ones they gave the money to. And they were the ones that told everyone else what to do and how to do it. When you contact them to say you want to go with them, it's a *señora* you talk to.

Spener: But don't they speak Spanish then?

Sandra: Yes, they speak Spanish, but not very well. And the lady's kids only spoke English. She had another guy translating for her because she had a hard time understanding Spanish.⁵

Later that night another group of migrants arrived at the house and it was quite crowded. The next evening the big group of migrants, now around 30 persons, including the Brazilians, left the house and were loaded 15- each into two tractor-trailer rigs. They drove for a short time and then unloaded along the side of the highway at around midnight to walk around the immigration checkpoint run by the Border Patrol north of Laredo on Interstate 35 [see Map 2 on page 4]. Although it was summer, they were fortunate that it was relatively cool with a steady rain. The drivers of the rigs handed them off to two men who would guide them through the brush. These two men told them to stay quiet and walk in a single file, following one of the men, with the other bringing up the rear. Sandra recalled that "They told us to stay in that formation because if one of us fell behind or got lost, they would have to leave us there." They also told the group that if the Border Patrol apprehended them, they should say that they were all walking on their own with no guide. Sandra explained that it was in the migrants' interest not to finger their guides, since they would depend on them to try to cross again if they were caught this time:

Sandra: They said that if immigration caught us we should say we didn't know who the guides were. When we were going through the *monte* [brush], the two guides told us that if the *migra* catches us we should say that they were just two more *mojados*, like us.

Spener: And was everyone agreeable to this?

Sandra: Well, who knows what they would have done if they'd caught us? But yes, we agreed. Because they didn't treat us badly or anything.

Spener: You had already paid half the trip, right? What would have happened if *la migra* had caught you?

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Sandra: If you don't make it, they'll take you back across again without charging you the down payment again.

Spener: And did they tell you where to go to hook up with them again if you were caught?

Sandra: No, they didn't. But a kid from Peñasco was with us and he had tried to cross the week before. The *migra* caught him and sent him back. And the coyotes were bringing him again, without paying, from Peñasco to Laredo and from Laredo to here. He didn't have to pay again. They keep bringing you across until you make it.⁶

Although she had only had to walk a total of five hours through the brush—many migrants in the contemporary period have to walk days or even a week to get around the immigration checkpoints, with hundreds dying each year—Sandra had found the hike to be grueling.⁷ She was also angry, given that she had been told ahead of time that there would be no walking involved. Because of this, she said she would not cross again with these coyotes, even though she had made it successfully to San Antonio:

Spener: So, do you think you would use these same coyotes to cross again? If someone else was thinking about crossing, what would you tell them about this experience?

Sandra: I wouldn't want to do it again. I walked a lot and I arrived all full of thorns. The brush is thick, and you get stuck by thorns all along the way. At the moment we crossed the river, I threw my socks away since they were wet, and I had to walk in my tennis shoes with no socks, so I got blisters all over my feet.

Spener: So, there weren't any paths to follow?

Sandra: No, only in a few places. I think they had gone through there before, because the grass was all trampled in places. But in other places, no. And then we had to go through a section full of *nopales* [prickly pear cactus]. There was no way through, you just had to try to avoid the thorns as much as you could. And then the guides got lost. *Se nortearon* [they got bewildered]. So we had to go through that same thicket of *nopales* twice!

Spener: How did they know where to go? Did they have flashlights or anything?

Sandra: No, we walked in dark. I guess they just knew the way. I noticed that they had hung ribbons on the trees in some places, so they would know where they were.

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Not only was she anxious about whether she would ever see her son again (not to mention the two babies she had left behind with her husband), Sandra feared for herself on the hike through the brush. This was not something she had ever done before and she wasn't prepared for it:

I was scared from the beginning. But then when we just had to walk and walk, I was so tired and we didn't have any water. Then I really got scared, since they had told us that if we couldn't keep up, they'd have to leave us behind. So I was afraid that they'd leave me out there in the middle of nowhere. And I think they would have done it, too! But I managed to keep up. Thank God we didn't have too hard a time getting through [*no batallamos en pasar*].

Although Sandra was not happy about having to hike as much as she had done, she was also aware that the Brazilians on the trip had experienced a lot worse crossing through Mexico. When she complained about being too tired to go on, her uncle told her to just keep going, the Brazilians had spent 18 days getting through Mexico and had told him that they had walked two whole days in Chiapas after crossing the country's southern border with Guatemala. One of Brazilian men had lost a shoe in Mexico and was walking through the brush barefoot. She didn't know why he hadn't gotten another pair of shoes in Nuevo Laredo. She supposed it was because the Brazilians didn't have any money with them, but wasn't sure because she really couldn't understand their language.

He only had one shoe. Just one! But then he took it off. Then he put it back on again. Then he switched it from one foot to another. Then for a while he tied tee-shirts around his feet and tried to walk like that so they wouldn't burn so much. His companions helped him along, sort of half carrying him. He was falling behind as we were getting near the end and they asked the guide to wait up because his feet were bleeding. But the *muchacho* said we couldn't wait because the trailer was already there waiting for us. Later, when we finally made it to the hotel in San Antonio, the drivers brought him some alcohol so his feet would heal up. Because the Brazilians were headed to Florida from here.

The migrants and their coyotes walked in silence so as not to attract the attention of any Border Patrol agents who were watching the area. The two guides communicated with one another with hand signs. There were times when they had everyone duck down and keep still to be sure that they were not detected by anyone else in the area. Although the guides had warned that anyone who couldn't keep up on the trail would be left behind, the

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migrants helped one another out as they marched through the night. There was another young woman on the trip who also had a difficult time keeping up the pace and the men took her by the hand and helped her along. When they had to climb over barbed wire fences, the men in the group let the two women go first and kept them from falling or getting stuck. The only one on the trip who had serious difficulties was the shoeless Brazilian man.

At about four in the morning they arrived at an abandoned gasoline station where the same two tractor-trailer rigs awaited them. The two guides stayed behind in the brush while 15 migrants climbed into the sleeping compartments of each of the two truck cabs. These coyotes apparently were aware of the dangers of transporting migrants locked in the trailers of such rigs—19 migrants had died in the back of one such rig in Victoria, Texas the year before in the worst single tragedy to ever befall a group of migrants as they attempted to enter the United States.⁸ I asked Sandra what it was like traveling with so many people in the cab of the truck:

Sandra: They don't load us in the trailer compartment [*en la caja*]. They have us get up into the sleeping compartment [*el camarote*]. Not in the back, because they say there are more difficulties if they leave us locked in there. And we all got in.

Spener: What was the sleeping compartment like with 15 people in there?

Sandra: Well, it's kind of like a bunk bed [*una litera*], like a double bed, with some up above and some down below. But we were all piled in there, real scrunched up, but no one was on top of anyone else. There was plenty of air. It went fine. No problem.

Sandra didn't know what town the gas station where they were picked up was, but she estimated that it was only about two hours away from San Antonio. The truck drivers, who were gringos and didn't speak Spanish, took them to a motel somewhere in the city, where a Mexican man had rented a couple of rooms for them, one for the passengers from each rig. They stayed there for a few hours waiting for the coyotes to confirm that the remaining monies the migrants owed had been wired to their account. After a little while, the Mexican man went to the room where Sandra was staying with five Mexican companions and the Brazilians.

He came in and said, "Let's go. Just the Mexicans. I'm going to take you guys now." There were five of us: My uncle, another guy, the other girl, and me. I had gotten friendly with the other

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girl on the trip—we'd tried to look out for each other. After we left the hotel, the coyotes dropped us off at her house and she let us stay there until somebody from our family came to pick us up. She was coming as a *mojada* [a wet], too, like us, but she makes her home here in San Antonio. Her kids were born here and everything. She let us stay with her until we were able to get a hold of my aunt and she brought us over here to this house.

Since news stories often reported migrants being held against their will under armed guard, I asked Sandra what kept migrants from leaving once they arrived at the hotel. At first she didn't understand my question since they hadn't waited that long and trying to leave without paying hadn't even occurred to her. She knew to expect to wait until the rest of the money for here trip was wired—that was the way she knew things would be from the beginning. I then asked her more specifically if any of the coyotes anywhere along the way were armed or brandished weapons against them:

Spener: Another question I always have is that sometimes they talk about extortions and abuses committed along the way. Were these people armed? Did they carry pistols, knives, anything like that?

Sandra: No, we didn't see anything on them. Just the man that took us from Peñasco to Laredo. He had a pistol in his car, but he never took it out or anything.

Spener: And in Nuevo Laredo, did any of those people ...

Sandra: Well, the ones that took us across the river from Laredo, Mexico to Laredo, Texas, they got high before they took us, with marijuana, but they did it off to one side, not in front of us. And the lady where we left my son, she was smoking a cigarette. Those were the only bad things I saw.⁹

One of the things that Sandra thought was remarkable about the trip was that they had not seen any sign of the Border Patrol anywhere along the route once they had crossed the river—no vehicles, no agents, nothing. People from Peñasco thought that the coyotes probably had some kind of connection inside that got the Border Patrol to look the other way when they came through. One of the reasons they thought so was that these coyotes only crossed into Texas on Wednesdays. Doña Anita, who had been listening quietly to my conversation with Sandra, suddenly interjected when this question came up:

Anita: Sandra's mother used to say that, too. That you can only cross on Wednesdays.

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Spener: What's so special about Wednesdays?

Anita: They're all in cahoots together. I imagine that the immigration agents know they're coming and they let them through.

Sandra: My mother also came on a Wednesday. And there was this guy from Jalisco with us on the trip. He said they always went on Wednesdays, too. He'd wanted to leave on Sunday when he got to Laredo but they told him they only crossed on Wednesday. He said he figured it was because *la migra*, the Border Patrol, wouldn't be checking the brush where we were. And he was right, because while we were walking we didn't see a single agent. Not even one! I imagine that immigration is working with them because we didn't see any immigration at all.

Spener: So, you don't think it was just luck, they knew what they were doing.

Anita: Yes, it seems that way to me. Because they always cross on Wednesdays and they always make it.

Sandra: We even walked through a little town and still, nothing. That's why I say immigration must be in on it and lets them through.

Spener: Well, it wouldn't be the first time something like this has happened.

Sandra: The girl who came with us said she has a family member who has a friend that brings kids across the bridge in Eagle Pass. The woman's husband works for immigration. When he's working the bridge, he lets her bring the kids across.

Of course, Sandra and her aunt were just speculating about the possible collaboration between Sandra's coyotes and the Border Patrol. They had seen no real evidence of any such conspiracy. Still, there had been many documented cases of immigration and customs agents taking payment from coyotes in return for letting them bring migrants across the bridges or through the immigration checkpoints on the highways leading away from the border. Thus, their speculation about a possible deal between the coyotes and elements of the Border Patrol could not be dismissed out of hand.¹⁰

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REUNITING WITH HER SON

Sandra had received no word about her son during the trip nor did she learn anything definitive when she first arrived in San Antonio. All the coyotes would say was, “Don’t worry, he’ll be here soon.” When she got to the home of the other woman who had been traveling with her, she called her uncle in Seattle, the one who had set up her trip with these coyotes, to see if he knew or could find out anything. The uncle called the coyotes, who told him that they were buying some clothes for José Raúl, since he would be coming across on the bridge. He’d be there soon, they told him. A few hours later Sandra got a call that they should go pick up her son at a mall. He would be waiting for them there with a woman and another child.

Spener: How did he seem when you got there?

Sandra: He looked fine, but he was crying. I think he’d had about as much as he could take [*estaba desesperado*].

Spener: How did it seem like they had treated him?

Sandra: Fine, because I asked him if they’d given him anything to eat and he’d eaten. If they had been mean to him at all [*si no le habían regañado*]. He said no, they hadn’t. In fact they had bought some toys for him, I think so he wouldn’t cry. I asked him if they’d done anything to him, and he said no.

Spener: And you didn’t see that he had suffered?

Sandra: No, because there had been other kids with them, too. I asked the girl that was waiting with him at the mall if the other boy that she had was hers, but she said she couldn’t tell me anything. So we just picked him up and left. I didn’t talk with her at all.

REFLECTING ON HOW SHE’D BEEN TREATED BY THE COYOTES

Sandra’s memories of making the trip, which she had only completed a few days earlier, were still fresh in her mind and vivid. She was happy to have made it and to be reunited with her son. The coyotes obviously knew what they were doing and got them to San Antonio expeditiously and safely. No one had harassed her or treated her son badly. Everything had gone more or less according to plan—she left home one evening and was in San Antonio the very next day. At the same time, she was evidently upset about having had to walk when she had been led to believe—whether by the coyotes or by her family members was not clear—that she wouldn’t have to walk at all. Moreover, she had not been told that she and her son would be

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separated, something she would never have consented to had she known ahead of time. In addition, she had been frightened by the coyotes' warnings that she would be left behind on the trail if she couldn't keep up and had been horrified at the suffering of the shoeless Brazilian man. How was it possible that no one had gotten him a new pair of shoes to wear? And she was not happy that the young men with the inner tubes took them across the river stoned. She was also disturbed by several of the interactions she had with the coyotes along the way.

Sandra was insulted at the way that one of the *jefas* of the coyotes had responded when Sandra and her companions told the woman that those young men in the parking lot in Laredo had tried to charge them more money to be driven to her house.

Those guys wanted her to give them more money for us, as if we were something to be sold. They treated us like animals that can be bought and sold. And then later the *señora* asked us if they'd tried to get us to give them money and we said yes. And she told us they were trying to rip-off her merchandise [*ganerle la mercancía*], as if we were things.

Nevertheless, the señoras had treated them in a friendly, courteous manner once they were at the house in Laredo. They asked them if they wanted to take a shower and if they wanted anything to eat. "They treated us well and were friendly and all. They said, "Eat up because you're going to be leaving soon." But the two women spoke English between them and Sandra and the other migrants didn't understand anything they said to one another.

With most of the rest of the coyotes, there was little conversation. The guides in the brush had asked them to walk silently, so they barely talked with them on the trek around the checkpoint. When they got to the gas station where they climbed back into the trucks, the *trailereros* [truckers] were angry at the guides for having arrived an hour late. In her case, the trucker just heaved the fifteen migrants up into the sleeping compartment and threw them one bottle of water for all of them to share. When they got to the hotel in San Antonio, the truckers didn't get them any lunch to eat. When they asked for food, the truckers said no, they would just have to wait until their families came to get them. A little later, one of the truckers came to her room and just threw a little food on the bed and said, very rudely, "Here you go, eat." Sandra said it was just some snacks, very little food for fifteen people who had just been through the ordeal they had experienced. She and her cousin took only a few bites and left the rest for the Brazilians, since they were going to wait in the hotel longer before traveling on to Florida. Later, they spoke a little more with the Mexican man who came to

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drive them to the house of the other woman on the trip. He asked them where they were from and when they said Peñasco, he said that was where he was from originally, too, but that he had lived in Texas for many years. And then there was the non-conversation with the young woman who brought her son and the other child to the mall. In spite of the fact that so many people from Peñasco traveled with this group of coyotes, there did not seem to be much love lost between the coyotes and their customers. There had been, as Sandra said, *muy poca relación* [very little interaction] between them on the trip.

THE NEXT STEPS SHE WOULD TAKE

Towards the end of the interview, little José Raúl scampered into the living room after having finished watching a video cartoon in the bedroom in the back of the house. He sat on his mother's lap and sucked his thumb anxiously as we wrapped up. Sandra had been able to speak with her parents by phone. They were happy and relieved that she and their grandson had made it. They were looking forward to being reunited with her in Seattle in a few days. Another of her uncles (she seemed to have a lot of uncles) would come in his car to pick her up tomorrow or the next day to drive her there. First, though, they would pass through St. Louis, Missouri, far out of their way, to drop off the uncle that had traveled with her from Peñasco, as well as one of her cousins and another young man from Peñasco. There was, apparently, another outpost of the growing Peñasco diaspora in that Midwestern city. They were still waiting for the cousin to arrive in San Antonio, however. He was supposed to have traveled with Sandra and her uncle the previous Wednesday, but the coyotes did not have room for him and he had to wait until the next week. He had left the previous evening and was due to arrive sometime that afternoon or evening. They were just waiting to hear from him. Sandra's parents said it would take her about three days to get to Seattle. They would help her find work. After that she would try to get custody of her other two children and bring them to Seattle to join her:

I don't know when I'll go back to Mexico. Next I'll have to struggle to get my kids. The two others that I had to leave in Mexico. One is two years old and the other is just seven months. It's going to take a lot to get them here. I'll have to find someone else who will bring them across the border. And now I'm going to have even more trouble because I spoke to their father and he doesn't want to give them to me. He says he's going to keep them there with him. So, who knows how it's all going to work out.

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At the end of most of the interviews I conducted with migrants, I asked them if there was any special message they'd like to send to the people of the United States about their experiences as Mexicans who have come to this country. In retrospect, it was really quite unfair to ask Sandra this question. She was still in the middle of a harrowing voyage and really did not know yet what to expect about life in this country or what its non-Mexican inhabitants would be like. I did ask it, however, and she looked at me blankly at first. Coming to her aid, Doña Anita offered an answer from her point of view, having also crossed the border clandestinely and having lived in the United States for over a decade:

Spener: Just imagine that you could send a message through this microphone to the American people about the Mexicans that come to the United States. What would you say to them?

Anita: I'd just like to say to the *bolillos* [white, Anglo Americans], we're just coming here to work. We're not bad people. I have been discriminated against, I've experienced it, but the great majority of you are good people. In fact, the *bolillos* help Mexican people a lot, and the black people, too. There have been very few times when I've felt looked down upon. They've treated me well in the hospitals and just about everywhere. It's unusual to be discriminated against. A person comes here to progress, to help out her family, not to get into trouble.

Sandra: Please do not discriminate against us so much. Remember we don't come here to get into trouble. We're just here to work, to get ahead.

In Sandra's case, she was also here to escape an abusive relationship and to reunite with her parents. She had been brought across the border by the same women who had brought her mother before her and might well bring her other two children after her. Whether they would all get ahead or not remained to be seen.

Bilingual Spanish/English Glossary of Migration-Related Terms from the South Texas-Northeast Mexico Border Region

Agarrada Used by migrants to refer to an arrest/apprehension by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Bodies Used by Border Patrol agents to indicate how many people they have apprehended on a given day or are holding in detention in a given place, as in *How many bodies did we get today?*

Bracero A Mexican agricultural laborer that has come to work in the United States, whether under legal contract or as an undocumented immigrant. Derives from the Spanish word *brazo*, meaning “arm” in English.

Bracero Program A series of annual agreements between the Mexican and U.S. governments that permitted U.S. farmers to hire migrant Mexican laborers on a legally-contracted basis. The program began in 1942 to help U.S. farmers meet labor shortages brought about by U.S. involvement in the Second World War. It was ended unilaterally by the United States in 1964. U.S. farmers issued between four and five million temporary work contracts to Mexican men during the life of the program.

Brinco Literally “hop” or “skip.” Used by migrants and coyotes to refer to that leg of the migration journey that consists of crossing the Río Bravo del Norte/Rio Grande from Mexico into Texas, as in *El patero se dedica nada más al brinco del río* [The patero’s job is limited to crossing the river].

Coyotaje The services provided by a coyote. Pronounced *koh-yo-TAH-hey*. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see Chapter 3 of *Clandestine Crossings*, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration,” as well as the author’s 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Coyote A person hired by undocumented migrants to help them enter the United States or by a U.S. employer to procure migrant labor. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see Chapter 3 of *Clandestine Crossings*, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration,” as well as the 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

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EWI Acronym used by U.S. Border Patrol agents to refer to migrants that have “entered without inspection,” i.e., that have entered the United States without presenting proper documentation to an immigration inspector at a legal port of entry. Pronounced *EE-whee*.

El otro lado “The other side,” a term used by migrants in Mexico to refer to the United States, as in *Pienso ir al otro lado*.

Federales Mexican federal police.

Garita Immigration/customs inspection station. *La primera garita* [the first inspection station] is at the legal port of entry on the international bridges connecting Texas with Mexico. *La segunda garita* [the second inspection station] is the immigration checkpoint located along all the major thoroughfares in South Texas that lead away from the Mexican border. Migrants talk about having to get through/around the *garitas* on their way to live and work in the U.S. interior.

Grupo Beta The Mexican government’s migrant-protection unit that patrols the Mexican side of the border. Not a police or paramilitary force, it’s role is primarily to advise migrants of the dangers of clandestine border-crossing and aid them when they are in distress.

Harboring and transporting U.S. law makes it illegal for anyone to knowingly “harbor” and/or “transport” a person that is not legally-authorized to be present in U.S. territory.

ICE Acronym for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the unit of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that carries out enforcement activities, such as workplace raids, away from the border in the interior of the country. Pronounced “ice.”

Indocumentada/o An undocumented migrant.

Inmigración Literally, “immigration,” a term used colloquially by migrants to refer to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Judiciales The Mexican Judicial Police.

K-9, K-9 unit Refers to the trained dogs deployed at immigration checkpoints to detect narcotics and persons concealed in vehicles.

Lower Rio Grande Valley This term usually refers to the region of South Texas downstream from the Falcon Reservoir, but people sometimes use it to refer to the region extending as far upstream as Laredo.

migra, La Short for *migración*, this colloquialism used by Mexican migrants to refer to the U.S. Border Patrol.

BILINGUAL GLOSSARY

Migración Literally, “migration,” this colloquialism is also used by Mexican migrants to refer to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Mojada/o An undocumented migrant. Literally, “wet,” this colloquialism is often translated to English as “wetback.” Although “wetback” in English is always pejorative, *mojada/o* is not necessarily intended by Mexican Spanish speakers to be denigrating, especially when the speaker is her or himself undocumented.

Mojarra A small fish, *Cichlasoma cyanoguttatum*, “mojarra del norte,” that swims the international boundary between Northeast Mexico and South Texas and whose maritime cousins are heavily fished for food elsewhere in Mexico. In a play on words, *mojarra* is used synonymously with *mojada/o* to refer to undocumented migrants.

Monte The dense brush that covers much of the South Texas landscape.

Municipales Local police forces in Mexico, in contradistinction to *federales* and *judiciales*.

Nopal The prickly-pear cactus that grows abundantly in the South Texas Brush Country.

OTM This acronym is used by U.S. Border Patrol agents to refer to the “other than Mexican” migrants they arrest. Pronounced *oh-tee-em*.

Paisano In Mexican Spanish, this term can refer to “fellow Mexicans” or “fellow townspeople.”

Papalote A windmill that pumps water out of an underground aquifer. In South Texas, a *papalote* is usually attached to a cattle trough or pond. Migrants and coyotes rely on papalotes to replenish their water as they trek through the brush.

Paterismo The occupation of or the services provided by a *patero*.

Patero Literally, an oarsmen aboard a shallow-draft boat known as a *pato*. In Tamaulipas, *patero* refers to men who illegally take people and/or contraband back and forth across the Río Bravo. It is sometimes used as a synonym for *coyote* or *pollero*. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see the author’s 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Pato While this usually means “duck” in English, in Tamaulipas a *pato* is a small, shallow-draft boat propelled by paddles or oars. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see the author’s

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2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Perrera Literally, “dog pound” or “dog kennel,” this term is used by Mexican migrants to refer to U.S. Border Patrol vans used to transport apprehended migrants to immigration detention centers. Roughly equivalent to “paddy wagon” in colloquial English.

Pollero A paid guide and/or transporter of migrants. Often used synonymously with **coyote**. For a more extensive discussion of the use of this term by Mexicans, see the author’s 2009 conference paper titled “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”

Pollo Slang term used by coyotes/polleros to refer to the migrants that they guide and transport across the border.

Port of entry The immigration and customs checkpoints along the border through which one may legally enter the United States.

Primera garita See **garita**.

Rancho In Mexican Spanish, this term refers to a small, impoverished rural settlement. It is not the same as a “ranch,” as understood in American English.

Ranchera/o The inhabitant of a *rancho* in Mexico.

Redada An immigration raid.

Río Bravo del Norte Mexicans use this name for what people in the United States call the Rio Grande.

Río Grande Valley Usually used interchangeably with *Lower Rio Grande Valley*.

Segunda garita See **garita**.

VR, VR’ed Acronym used by U.S. Border Patrol agents for “voluntary return.” It refers to Mexican migrants “voluntarily” waiving their right to a hearing in U.S. immigration court and agreeing to return to Mexico without being formally deported. It is in migrants’ interest to waive this right in order to avoid lengthy detention while awaiting a hearing in immigration court. Since the 1920s, the vast majority of Mexicans apprehended by the Border Patrol have been *VR’ed* to their country using this bureaucratic procedure.

Notes

CHAPTER 1

¹ Both Álvaro's name and the name of his hometown are pseudonyms. The migratory experiences of a group of six young men from La Carmela, who hiked a route through the South Texas brush from Laredo to Encinal, are detailed in *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (CCMC), Chapter 2, "Clandestine Crossing at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century: The Long March through the Brush Country." References to Álvaro's story appear in CCMC on pages 62-63, 72-73, 146-147, 167-168, and 218-219.

² For a more detailed description of the crossing conditions in Webb County, Texas, see *CCMC*, introduction and Chapter 2, "The Long March through South Texas."

³ For a more extensive discussion of this border-crossing strategy, which I refer to as *friendship, not coyotaje*, see *CCMC*, Chapter 2, "The Long March through South Texas," and Chapter 4, "Types of Coyotaje Practiced at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century on the Northeast Mexico-South Texas Border."

⁴ Migrants can face federal criminal charges for illegally entering the United States. They are tried and sentenced on such charges in federal criminal courts. Following their apprehension by U.S. law enforcement authorities, migrants may either be formally *deported* or, euphemistically, *voluntarily returned* to Mexico. *Deportations* can only be ordered by federal immigration courts, an administrative court system that is separate and independent from the federal criminal courts. Most Mexican migrants waive their right to a hearing in an immigration court so that they will be immediately returned to Mexico. This is what the term *voluntary return* refers to. If migrants request a formal hearing before an immigration judge, they might have to wait weeks in jail before their hearing is scheduled. If the immigration judge determines that the migrants do not have the right to remain in the United States, s/he orders the migrants to be formally deported to Mexico. Migrants who are formally deported face more serious criminal penalties for illegal entry if they are apprehended again by law enforcement authorities in the United States. It is largely up to the discretion of U.S. authorities whether migrants like Álvaro's brother who are convicted of criminal illegal entry are sent before an immigration judge

to be formally deported or given the option of voluntary return to Mexico. In colloquial speech in both English and Spanish, the terms *deport/deportation* are used to refer to both formal deportation and voluntary return. As readers might imagine, this colloquial use of a legal term often creates confusion in the minds of migrants who are not well-educated about the operation of the U.S. legal system.

⁵ These C.O.D. arrangements were the most common payment arrangements I heard about from migrants and coyotes I interviewed. Often, migrants would have to cover the costs of their own transport to the border itself. For more discussion of payment arrangements between migrants and their coyotes, see *CCMC*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power: The Social Embeddedness of Coyote-Assisted Border Crossings.”

⁶ In Tamaulipas, the coyotes that specialize in taking migrants just across the river to the Texas side are known as *pateros*. For more information, see *CCMC*, “Terminology Used in This Book,” as well as Spener, David. 2009. “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.” Paper presented on June 11 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil at the XXVIII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association.

⁷ Developed in the late 1990s, this database is used by the Border Patrol to identify “recidivist” migrants and migrants that are wanted for other criminal charges by police authorities in the United States. For more information on the IDENT system, see *CCMC*, Chapter 1, “The Unfolding of Apartheid in South Texas.”

⁸ For a complete account of the Victoria tragedy, see Jorge Ramos’ book *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History*, published in 2006 by Harper Paperbacks. See also the introductory chapter of *CCMC*, as well as portions of Chapter 4, “Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period” and Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power.” For a discussion of the way the Victoria incident was portrayed by the authorities and in the press, see Spener, David. 2008. “El apartheid global, el coyotaje y el discurso de la migración clandestina: Distinciones entre violencia personal, estructural y cultural.” *Migración y Desarrollo* 10:127-56. [English-language version available at <http://www.migracionydesarrollo.org/>].

⁹ U.S. Homeland Security officials frequently describe these transactions among participants in the chain of coyotes as one coyote “buying” a “load” from another, giving a sinister, slave-trade cast to the process. Similarly, a Mexican consular official I interviewed said that many of the misfortunes that befell migrants at the hands of their coyotes involved disagreements over payments to be made between different links in the coyote chain. See *CCMC*, Chapter 4, “Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period.”

NOTES

CHAPTER 2

¹ This story was originally published in 1999 in the *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Volume 33, No. 3, pp. 22-23. I thank Rubén Hernández-León for introducing me to El Carpintero in Monterrey in August 1999. Dr. León-Hernández also mentions this coyote using the nickname “El Gringo” in his book *Metropolitan Migrants: The Migration of Urban Mexicans to the United States*, published in 2008 by the University of California Press. Rubén Hernández-León is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Los Angeles.

² For a number of empirical, analytical, and ideological reasons, I no longer uses the terms *smugglers* and *smuggling* to refer to the professional and semi-professional facilitators of undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States. In more recent publications, I use the term *coyote* to refer to the people providing such migration-facilitating services and *coyotaje* to refer to the services themselves. For an explanation of the reasons for making this terminological change, see *CCMC*, the section titled “Terminology Used in this Book,” as well Chapter 3, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration.”

CHAPTER 3

¹ The names of José and María, their family members, and the village where they lived are all pseudonyms. I have also altered some other minor aspects of their story in order to protect their anonymity. References to José and María’s story appear in *CCMC* on pages 134-135, 182-183, and 218.

² A *rancho* in this part of Mexico refers to any small rural, agricultural settlement located some distance away from the nearest *pueblo* (town). It is not synonymous with what Anglophone readers would call a *ranch*.

³ I saw numerous production facilities of this kind dotting the rural Guanajuato countryside, most of them owned and operated by Bachoco, the biggest poultry-processing company in Mexico. According to the company’s website, it operates more than 700 production facilities throughout the country (<http://www.bachoco.com.mx/spanish/faq.asp>, consulted on February 5, 2006).

⁴ Indeed, this is the most common payment arrangement I have found in all the migrant communities where I have conducted interviews.

⁵ *Pateros* take clandestine migrants across the Río Bravo to Texas in boats, inflatable rafts, or inner tubes. Their services typically involve nothing more than the river crossing.

⁶ Although José and María considered their situation to be unusual in this regard, in my field work I have interviewed other informants in other communities who were in the same type of binational relationship in which one partner was a U.S. citizen and the other was an undocumented Mexican national, but both were either born in the same town in Mexico or one was the child of someone who was born in the same town in Mexico who had migrated to the United States years earlier. These types of marriages are consistent with Rouse's characterization of Mexican transnational communities as spanning the border in migratory circuits. See Rouse, Roger. 1991. "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism." *Diaspora* 1:1:8-23.

⁷ See *CCMC*, Chapter 1, "The Unfolding of Apartheid in South Texas."

⁸ Data supplied to the author by the U.S. Border Patrol.

⁹ A man from another part of Guanajuato recounted to me how he had to return to his rancho after being apprehended by the Border Patrol in the brush not far from Eagle Pass, Texas. I asked him why he and the coyote and the other migrants did not re-group in Piedras Negras and cross again immediately. The problem, he explained, was that in getting caught by the Border Patrol the group had missed the ride that was waiting for them past the checkpoint. When I asked him why the coyote could not simply call the driver to tell him they would be leaving again immediately and to wait for them at the designated spot, he said that they would have to wait another full week before the driver could return for them the following Sunday. The driver, it turned out, worked full-time in Dallas during the week and could only pick migrants up on Sunday, his day off.

¹⁰ Most migrants I have interviewed most of the time do not pay their coyotes much of the fee for their trip until they arrive in their U.S. destination (see *CCMC*, Chapter 5, "Trust, Distrust, and Power"). Cases in which migrants will be transported in a commercial tractor trailer rig seem to be something of an exception to this rule, however. Presumably, coyotes that collect half the total fee at the outset of the trip do so in order to be able to use the cash to recruit professional truck drivers to haul their customers. These truckers are frequently Anglo Americans who are not tightly integrated into the coyote network for whom the occasionally (and quite profitably) drive.

¹¹ A *coyota* is a female *coyote*.

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¹² Typically, Mexicans who are apprehended by the U.S. immigration authorities near the border sign an agreement to “voluntarily” return to Mexico immediately, without facing criminal charges or going through a formal deportation proceeding. “Voluntary return” is advantageous to both the immigration authorities and the apprehended migrants. The former avoid having to dedicate scarce prosecutorial resources and detention space to routine cases involving non-violent offenders. The latter can make another attempt to enter the U.S. surreptitiously without running the risk of being charged with illegal re-entry after deportation, which is a felony carrying a maximum charge of five years in prison.

¹³ It was telling that in describing this professional to me, José called him a *contador*—an accountant. Like many other Mexican labor migrants I have interviewed, José’s comprehension of the U.S. legal system was extremely limited. It is also quite possible that the *contador* was not an attorney at all, since there have been many incidents reported in the press of unscrupulous businesspeople posing as immigration professionals who are, in fact, not attorneys and are not licensed to give immigration advice or prepare immigration applications. See, for example, Marshall 2005.

¹⁴ Attorneys I subsequently consulted about their situation told me that José’s conviction meant that it would be extremely difficult for him to *ever* get admitted legally into the United States in the future.

¹⁵ In spite of the fact that he had worked in concert with a coyote in transporting other migrants once before and, as a consequence, was a convicted “alien smuggler” in the eyes of the U.S. government, José did not regard himself as ever having worked as a coyote.

¹⁶ José and María introduced me to Roberto at the festival atop the mountain described at the outset of this chapter. I tried to convince him to grant me an interview, but he was unwilling to talk to me. The information given here is based on what José and María told me about him. Although I was able to elicit accounts of their experiences with coyotes from migrants in the region in and around San Nicolás, I was not able to interview any coyotes directly. José and María told me on a subsequent visit that several people in San Nicolás had questioned their willingness to talk to me about their experiences. They wondered if I was with the *migra* and had gone there to spy on them in order to help the U.S. authorities figure out how to put a stop to so many people from the area crossing the border. José and one of his brothers, whom I also interviewed, said that even though everyone knew who the coyotes were and that neither migrants nor the coyotes themselves regarded them as *criminals*, the coyotes were well aware that they were breaking the law by taking people across the border

and therefore had ample reason not to discuss their activities with a gringo outsider whom they did not know.

¹⁷ Like many Mexicans, José seemed to think of the “true” Americans as being the non-Hispanic population. Nearly all the Latin Americans he had known in Texas had been either working class Mexican immigrants or Mexican Americans who, in his personal experiences, were already more or less familiar with the “truth” of the experiences of the *indocumentados*.

¹⁸ In the state of Texas, by law all drivers must carry current liability insurance coverage in addition to a valid driver’s license.

CHAPTER 4

¹ The names of Hilda and Julián, their town, and other people discussed in this story are all pseudonyms. References to Julián’s experiences appear in *CCMC* on pages 7-9 and 225.

² *Pateros* is the name given in Tamaulipas and South Texas to men and women who ferry undocumented migrants across the Río Bravo/Rio Grande away from the international bridges that connect the two states. For more information on the origins of this term, see Spener, David. 2009. “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.” Paper presented on June 11 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to the XXVII Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Panel CSM034 “Migration, Religion and Language.” Available online at <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/congress-papers/lasa2009/files/SpenerDavid.pdf>.

³ The state of Texas had not yet begun to require applicants for a driver’s license to present a valid Social Security number and other documents demonstrating their right to reside in the United States.

⁴ Undocumented Mexicans and their coyotes in Ciudad Juárez had long ago mastered “the look” that was most likely to make U.S. immigration authorities mistake them for U.S.-born Mexican Americans. See Debbie Nathan’s essay “The Eyes of Texas Are upon You” in her book *Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the U.S.-Mexico Border* (1991, Cinco Puntos Press, El Paso, Texas).

⁵ It was not until 2008 that all persons entering the United States at a land port of entry had to show identification to immigration inspectors. Prior to that time, it was left to the discretion of individual inspectors whether or not to require entrants to produce documentation that demonstrated their legal right to enter the country.

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⁶ The documents that they coyote had provided them were the so-called laser visas, the updated version of the old border-crossing card that now had biometric data embedded in it. At the time Hilda and Julián were arrested on this occasion, agents were not yet checking the fingerprints of all non-citizen entrants at land ports. That would not happen until later in the decade with the implementation of the U.S. Visit program.

⁷ So dangerous was this canal to migrants crossing the border that the U.S. Border Patrol in the El Paso sector eventually set up a Swift-Water Rescue Team in response to numerous drownings in the canal. See http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/newsroom/news_releases/archives/2008_news_releases/may_2008/05232008_8.xml.

⁸ News reports from the early 2000s indicated that the sale of visas and other documents by U.S. consular personnel was a regular occurrence in Ciudad Juárez. See López, Sonny. 2003a. "Consulate Halts Issuing of Visas." *Dallas Morning News*, June 19, online edition; and López, Sonny. 2003b. "Consulate in Juárez Reopens after Visa Woes." *Dallas Morning News*, June 20, online edition.

⁹ From the website of the Texas Department of State Health Services: "WIC is a nutrition program that helps pregnant women, new mothers, and young children eat well, learn about nutrition, and stay healthy. Nutrition education and counseling, nutritious foods, and help accessing health care are provided to low-income women, infants, and children through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program, popularly known as WIC. Retrieved on October 31, 2009 from <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/wichd/>.

¹⁰ Literally, a "chicken grower" or "chicken farmer." Originally used on the western stretches of the U.S.-Mexico border as a synonym for coyote, today it is widely used throughout Mexico and Central America to refer to the service-providers hired by migrants to help them enter the United States. For a more complete explanation of the origins and use of this term See Spener 2009, "Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border."

CHAPTER 5

¹ References to Beto's story appear *CCMC* on pages 172-173, 187-191, and 198. Beto and the name of the town where he lived are pseudonyms.

² For more discussion of Rigoberto's migratory experiences, see Spener, David. Forthcoming. "Movidas rascuaches: Strategies of Migrant Resistance at the Mexico-U.S. Border." To appear in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*.

³ For an in-depth discussion of the cultural connotations of the term *rascuache* and its relevance to clandestine border-crossing, see Spener, David. Forthcoming. "Movidas Rascuaches: Strategies of Migrant Resistance at the Mexico-U.S. Border." To appear in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*.

⁴ The town of Boquillas used to be a popular spot for U.S. tourists to visit by crossing the river by rowboat in the opposite direction. The town was memorialized in the song "Gringo Honeymoon," composed by the popular country singer Robert Earl Keen. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, the Border Patrol closed down this extra-official crossing, which provoked the withering of Boquillas, whose residents had depended upon tourism as their main source of income.

⁵ U.S. law does not, in fact, assign higher penalties for transporting non-Mexicans than for transporting Mexicans. I think that Beto's belief in this regard had more to do with the risk of prosecution within Mexico for transporting non-Mexicans through the country illegally.

⁶ Of course, this is not true for Guatemalans, though it would be true for both Salvadorans and Hondurans, the other two largest groups of Latin American immigrants that enter the United States by crossing its southern border with Mexico. I suspect he may have been thinking of the famous *corrido* by Los Tigres del Norte, "Tres Veces Mojado," which relates the travails of a Salvadoran man who attempts to migrate to the United States.

⁷ For more information on the intensification of border enforcement during this period, see *CCMC*, Chapter 1, "The Unfolding of Apartheid in South Texas."

⁸ In another interview, Beto told me that some friends of his had recently made it to Austin without hiring a coyote at all or being apprehended by the Border Patrol on the way.

⁹ *Dinero fácil* was a common trope used by my interviewees to talk about coyotes' role in the migration process. See *CCMC*, Chapter 6, "Passing Judgment: Coyotes in the Discourse of Clandestine Border-Crossing."

¹⁰ Today, more than half of criminal prosecutions in the U.S. federal courts are for immigration violations. See information provided by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse of Syracuse University at <http://trac.syr.edu/tracreports/crim/223/>.

¹¹ I do not know if Beto ever returned to Texas to work as a coyote. He has not called me since our last interview in 2002.

¹² For more discussion about migrants' strategies for avoiding abuses by their coyotes, see *CCMC*, Chapter 5, "Trust, Distrust, and Power."

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¹³ Migrants I interviewed had similar reactions to these public service announcements. See *CCMC*, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country.” See also the story on this website titled “It Was a Lot of Money But It Was Worth It.”

CHAPTER 6

¹ References to Paco’s story appear *CCMC* on pages 148, 157-158, 172, 185, 224, and 227.

² In Mexican Spanish, the set of services provided by coyotes are known as *coyotaje*, pronounced *koh-yoh-tah-hey*. See *CCMC*, “Terminology Used in This Book” and Chapter 3, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration.”

³ He also had two older school-aged children from a previous marriage, who lived with their mother.

⁴ According to Paco, one gallon of water was not enough during the hot months of the year, but there were windmills and spigots available on ranches where they could replenish their supply.

⁵ DPS is the acronym for the Texas Department of Public Safety, i.e., the highway patrol

⁶ Literally, “the crosser,” i.e., the person who takes someone else across the river.

⁷ Literally, “the hopper,” i.e., the person who dedicates himself to the *brinco* or “hop” across the river.

⁸ For a more extensive discussion of these terms see *CCMC*, “Terminology Used in this Book,” and Spener, David. 2009. “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.” Paper presented on June 11 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil at the XXVIII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association.

⁹ Prior to 2003, the Rio Grande Valley Sector of the U.S. Border Patrol was known as the McAllen Sector.

¹⁰ As part of Operation Rio Grande, the Border Patrol put up a checkpoint on Texas Highway 4, which leads from the beach at Boca Chica back into Brownsville. The “port” referred to here is the Port of Brownsville, located off that same highway.

¹¹ Literally a “ride-giver,” a latinization of the English word “ride.”

¹² See *CCMC*, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country,” for a detailed description of conditions faced by migrants as they trekked through South Texas.

¹³ Not literally “ranchers” in the sense given the term in the western U.S., but rather Mexican men from rural areas where subsistence agriculture and grazing, whether of goats or cattle, are the primary economic activities.

¹⁴ For further discussion of the issue of coyotes abandoning migrants on the trail, see *CCMC*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power,” and Chapter 6, “Coyotes in the Discourse of Clandestine Border-Crossing.”

¹⁵ As to how well smugglers take care of migrants on the trail, a Border Patrol agent I interviewed in March 2004 commented that agents *never* find migrants abandoned by smugglers in the brush who have received proper first aid for whatever ailments have prevented them from keeping up with their group.

¹⁶ This is not a big percentage discount, however, since Paco had been charging \$1,000 or more per person since the late 1990s: a \$250 discount on a \$5,000 fee.

¹⁷ See below on the difficulties he faced in dealing with the Matamoros authorities.

¹⁸ Paco’s belief about the separation between the drug smuggling and coyotaje on this section of the border was shared by Border Patrol agents, U.S. federal court officials, and other coyotes I interviewed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For further discussion of this point, see *CCMC*, Chapter 4, “Types of Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period.”

¹⁹ A year and a half after this interview I had the opportunity to ask a federal judge that tried many smuggling cases who was getting rich off smuggling business. His observation was that there were some people like Paco making a lot of money but that easy money was easy to spend. In other words, a smuggler from a working class background who suddenly had money was not likely to spend and invest it wisely. In most of the cases he tried, few assets of smugglers’ were seized besides the vehicles they owned.

²⁰ These are all small towns in South Texas along the U.S. 77 corridor between Harlingen and Kingsville.

CHAPTER 7

¹ References to Don Ignacio’s story appear in *CCMC* on pages 106, and 136-137.

² *Ejido* is the name for collectively-owned lands given to peasant communities as part of the land reforms of the Mexican Revolution.

³ For a more explanation of the colloquial use of the term *coyote* in Mexican Spanish and folklore, see *CCMC*, Chapter 3, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice

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Applied to Migration,” and Meléndez, Theresa. 1982. “Coyote: Towards a Definition of a Concept.” *Aztlán* 13:295-307.

⁴ One of the colloquial meanings of the term *coyote* in Mexican Spanish refers to a bureaucratic “fixer” that knows how to help his or her clients avoid government red tape in exchange for a fee. See *CCMC*, Chapter 3, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration” for a more extensive discussion of this meaning of coyote.

⁵ Interestingly, in our interview, Don Ignacio referred to the processing center using the Spanish word *campo*, as in recruitment/contracting *camp*. This made sense insofar as the conditions he described there more closely resembled those of a refugee or concentration camp than those of a government office.

⁶ To learn more about how the “specials” program worked, see Calavita, Kitty. 1992. *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* New York: Routledge.

⁷ Juan practiced what I call a *professional migration coyotaje* strategy. See *CCMC*, Chapter 4, “Coyotaje in the Contemporary Period.”

⁸ Literally, a “low-quality” coyote, but the term *rascuache* in colloquial Mexican and Chicano Spanish has rich connotations, as does the term coyote. For a more complete treatment of the meaning of *rascuache* as it relates to clandestine border-crossing and undocumented migration, see Spener, David. Forthcoming. “Movidas rascuaches: Strategies of Migrant Resistance at the Mexico-U.S. Border.” To appear in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*.

⁹ The distinction between the “good” coyotes from migrant-sending communities in the Mexican interior and the “bad” coyotes of the border towns was one I heard repeatedly in my interviews with migrants and coyotes alike. See *CCMC*, Chapter 6, “Passing Judgment: Coyotes in the Discourse of Clandestine Border-Crossing.”

CHAPTER 8

¹ The names of people and places in this story have been changed to protect the anonymity of my informants. Some minor alterations to the story have also been made for the same reason.

² For more an extensive discussion of the history of Mexican migration in South Texas, see *CCMC*, Chapter 1, “The Unfolding of Apartheid in South Texas.”

³ For further discussion of Operation Rio Grande and its effects on migrants, also see *CCMC*, Chapter 1.

⁴ For additional information on increased use of coyotes by migrants following the launch of Operation Rio Grande, see *CCMC*, Chapter 2, “Clandestine Crossing at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century.”

⁵ Whataburger is a popular fast-food hamburger chain in Texas.

⁶ In Texas, food stamps come in the form of the so-called “Lone Star” debit card, which can be used at stores to purchase food items only. Some recipients of this form of government transfer payments sell their cards for cash in order to be able to purchase other items besides the foodstuffs that may be purchased with the cards.

⁷ This was in keeping with the typical practice of coyotes to not collect the full fee from their customers until they delivered the migrants to their final destination. At that point, migrants’ friends and family members would come forth to pay the remainder of the money owed to the coyotes. For additional information about this C.O.D. system for payment of coyotes, see *CCMC*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power: The Social Embeddedness of Coyote-Assisted Border Crossings.”

⁸ For more detailed information on the structure of such networks, see *CCMC*, Chapter 4, “Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period.”

⁹ For additional information on this tragic incident, see *CCMC*, pages 5-7, 132-133, and 143-146.

¹⁰ For a more extensive discussion of the rhetoric of clandestine border-crossing in South Texas, see *CCMC*, Chapter 6, “Passing Judgment: Coyotes in the Discourse of Clandestine Border-Crossing.” See also Spener, David. 2008. “El apartheid global, el coyotaje y el discurso de la migración clandestina: Distinciones entre violencia personal, estructural y cultural.” *Migración y Desarrollo* 10:1:127-156. An English version of this article is available on line at <http://www.migracionydesarrollo.org/>.

CHAPTER 9

¹ Anita, Sandra, José Raúl, and the name of their hometown in Coahuila are all pseudonyms.

² Rough as this hike was, Sandra actually got off quite easy compared to what many migrants I have interviewed had to go through. See *CCMC*, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country,” and Chapter 6, “Passing Judgment.”

³ For more details on the tactics used by the Border Patrol to guard the riverbank, see *CCMC*, Chapter 1, “The Unfolding of Apartheid in South Texas,” the section titled “Operation Rio Grande: Barricading the Border in South Texas.” See also Robert Lee Maril’s detailed ethnography, *Patrolling*

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Chaos: The U.S. Border Patrol in Deep South Texas, published in 2004 by Texas Tech University Press.

⁴ Disputes between members of different links in the coyote chain can turn into serious problems for migrants. Many of the cases of migrants being held for “ransom” by their coyotes involve intra-network disputes about monies owed by one group of coyotes to another. See *CCMC*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power,” for more discussion of this issue.

⁵ Generally, *coyotaje* along the Texas-Mexico border has been a business run by Mexicans and Mexican Americans. It is impossible for us to know for certain whether the women Sandra took to be the leaders of this group of coyotes were “pure” *gringas*, light-skinned Mexican Americans, or perhaps *gringas* married to Mexicans or Mexican Americans. Regardless, the vast majority of defendants prosecuted as coyotes in the federal courts in Texas in the early 2000s were Mexicans and Mexican Americans. See *CCMC*, pages 184-185.

⁶ For a broader discussion of why migrants do not usually finger their coyotes when they are apprehended by the authorities, see *CCMC*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power: The Social Embeddedness of Coyote-Assisted Border Crossings.”

⁷ For more information on deaths of migrants, see *CCMC*, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country.”

⁸ To learn more about this terrible incident, see Jorge Ramos’ book *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History*, published in 2006 by Harper Paperbacks. See also the introductory chapter of *CCMC*, as well as portions of Chapter 4, “Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period” and Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power.” For a discussion of the way the Victoria incident was portrayed by the authorities and in the press, see Spener, David. 2008. “El apartheid global, el coyotaje y el discurso de la migración clandestina: Distinciones entre violencia personal, estructural y cultural.” *Migración y Desarrollo* 10:127-56. [English-language version available at <http://www.migracionydesarrollo.org/>].

⁹ For further discussion on the use of force and violence against migrants by their coyotes, see *CCMC*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power,” the section titled “Power Relations between Migrants and Coyotes.”

¹⁰ For more extensive discussion of collaboration between U.S. immigration agents and coyotes, see *CCMC*, Chapter 4, “Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period.”