



Navigating with Coyotes: Pathways of Central American Migrants in Mexico's Southern Borders

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This article presents research from an ethnographic investigation of the role of the men and women who facilitate clandestine border crossings (known colloquially as *coyotes*) in the Mexico-Guatemala northern borderlands. A significant portion of the fieldwork took place at La 72, a renowned migrant shelter in the Mexican border city of Tenosique, in the state of Tabasco. Findings suggest that the daily exchanges between migrants and their crossing facilitators constitute constant social negotiations through which these actors enrich their agency and profit from each other's well-being.

Keywords: human smuggling; transit migration; social navigation; undocumented migration; coyotes; Mexico

The social, political, and commercial exchanges among Central America, Mexico, and the United States are centuries-old and constantly changing. These exchanges have for generations included migratory flows. As a result of the armed conflicts in some Central American countries since the end of the 1970s, the displacement and undocumented migration, toward Mexico and the United States, of people from Central America's Northern Triangle (comprising El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), has generated significant interest in migration scholarship due to its alleged magnitude and visibility. While often described as unprecedented, the current flows reflect long-standing, even if evolving, socioeconomic and

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political processes that are taking place among Central American countries and Mexico.

The current exodus of people from Central America is not new, but reinforced immigration and border control mechanisms are (Foster 2007). Ongoing measures to control migration from Central America by Mexico take place at formal and informal crossing points along the Mexico-Guatemala and Mexico-Belize borders, as well as in states across southeast Mexico. Together, checkpoints, inspection sites, detention facilities, and other surveillance controls form a vast containment belt across southern Mexico that seeks to hold the flow of Central American migrants. The efforts have born fruit. Mexico has become the leader in the number of arrests involving Central America's undocumented migrants, as reflected by United States and Mexican deportation statistics. Starting in 2015 Mexican immigration authorities arrested and removed more Central Americans than its American counterpart, U.S. Customs and Border Protection.¹

Mexico plays a conflicting role in migration in the Central American region. Until the first decade of this century, the majority of the migrants detained during their clandestine attempts to cross the U.S.-Mexico border were Mexican nationals (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2016). For decades, the Mexican government has insisted on a binational dialogue with the United States about the protection of the human rights of millions of Mexican citizens who reside in the United States undocumented. Yet over the last 10 years, the reports of violence and corruption by Mexican authorities against undocumented Central American migrants in transit have generated an even higher level of concern. Thousands of Central American migrants have been reported dead or missing in their transit through Mexico, and the experiences of extortion, kidnapping, and sexual assault of many others have been well documented by migrant advocacy groups. The violence present on the road, alongside border controls and immigration enforcement, has in turn resulted in changes to the routes that historically had been used by Central American migrants for their northbound journeys, and in their migratory strategies that aim to reduce the inherent risks. In other words, migrants encounter along their journeys "actors who prey on and attempt to extort money from them; and humanitarian organizations that seek to assist and protect migrants" (Basok et al. 2015, 43), alongside "private actors who facilitate migration for a fee." In the Americas, the facilitators of these migrant journeys are collectively known as *coyotes*, and have throughout the region been the most visible if understudied actors in migrant mobility.

Even though there has been growing interest in the role of smugglers as part of clandestine migration dynamics, there is still a lack of clarity and consensus on what to do with the knowledge produced in current smuggling studies. Attempts have encompassed multiple theoretical orientations and methodological approaches (Baird and van Liempt 2016). In this particular project, I follow an organizational and network approach in an attempt to understand the dynamics of migrant-smuggler interactions undertaken en route that facilitate the transit and crossing of Central Americans across the southern Mexican border. The network approach suggests that smuggling depends on unique network characteristics: "it is the relations of individuals and the structure and distribution of those

relations which helps explain concrete smuggling operations” (Baird 2013, 12). By focusing on these exchanges as they take place in the context of migrant shelters, my analysis sheds light on the migration process and the links between constricting migratory policies, implemented mostly by transit and receiving countries, and countermeasures experienced at the micro-level in the smuggler-migrant interaction.

With ethnographic data collected during eight months of field research (September–November 2014; January–March 2015; May and November 2016), I examine how, during their journeys and through their interactions, migrants and smugglers navigate “social terrains” (Vigh 2006, 12) that allow them to devise responses to situations and each other based on shared experiences in mobility. In the same fashion that Baird (2013) highlights the importance of an organizational and network approach to study human smuggling operations, Nielsen and Vigh address the importance of the “social environment” of possibilities created by the agents and “its effects on one’s planned and actual movements” (Nielsen and Vigh, 2012, 661) when researching terrains in constant social change. In this vein, migrant shelters in Mexico illustrate this important social terrain or environment in which exchanges and interactions between migrants and smugglers take place. There, they plan and strategize the possibilities for transiting Mexico and moving north. Due to the lack of current research about the nature of the interactions occurring in these places, this contribution explores the effect of the migrant shelter as a “social environment” on the planned and actual trajectories followed by Central American migrants on their way into Mexico and into the United States as witnessed in one of the lesser studied migratory regions connecting Central America to Mexico: the Tenosique-Petén corridor.

Researching Smuggling

In this study, I analyze smuggler-migrant everyday interactions through Vigh’s concept of *social navigation*. Migrants navigate “within fluctuating social structures” in which they “act not only in relation to each other, or in relation to larger social forces, but in relation to the complex interaction between [them], the terrain and events,” reflecting the “encompass[ing] of social flux and instability ... influenc[ing] and becom[ing] ingrained in action” (Vigh 2006, 14). Seeking to identify the praxis of instability and movement, witnessed in the migrant-smuggler interaction, I rely on the testimonies of migrants staying at La 72,² a migrant shelter in the city of Tenosique, Tabasco, the first Mexican city on the Mexican side of the border from Guatemala, and adjacent to the Guatemalan Department of Petén.

Across Mexico there are dozens of houses and shelters established by civil society to provide basic shelter to migrants in transit. La 72 is in fact part of a chain of migrant shelters known as *casas de migrantes* and run by catholic priests of various orders grouped under what is called the Pastoral Dimension of Human Mobility, in Spanish, *pastoral de movilidad humana* (Guevara González 2015).

The shelters are often located in or next to a church, or as a standalone building, and offer temporary lodging, food, and emergency medical services for irregular migrants in transit. Some may offer additional services, such as legal assistance, mental health counseling, and communication services (i.e., access to telephones or email).

The empirical data analyzed here come from eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in the region. My observations were primarily conducted at La 72, where I lived as a volunteer. I conducted collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005), relying on participant observation, recording informal conversations, and carrying out retrospective interviews (Fetterman 2010). Volunteering at the shelter allowed me to have an active role as a staff member, participating directly in the conversations and interactions of those who relied on the shelter to plan their journeys—access that as a researcher alone, I would have been unlikely to attain. I chose collaborative ethnography methodology since it “pulls together threads of collaboration between the ethnographers and their consultants” (Lassiter 2005, 17). Due to the instability of the environment in which this research was carried out (that is, the unpredictable length of stays of my respondents), I relied on retrospective interviews, which allow the ethnographer to “reconstruct the past, asking informants to recall personal historical information” (Fetterman 2010, 42). These interviews were mostly recorded in informal social environments, allowing my respondents, despite the changing environment, to “shape the past highlights of their values and reveal the configuration of their worldviews” (Fetterman 2010, 42). I supplemented the interviews with informal conversations during day-to-day life at the shelter and the city of Tenosique, where the shelter is located. In total I conducted fifty-three retrospective interviews and had twenty informal conversations with migrants in transit, coyotes, shelter staff, hotel owners, taxi drivers, restaurant attendants, and members of law enforcement agencies operating locally. All interviews and informal talks were recorded with prior authorization of the involved persons, transcribed, and analyzed.

While living at La 72, I interacted directly with migrants every day. My proximity allowed me to witness migrant-smuggler negotiations occurring every day inside and outside the shelter. These interactions take place in a highly fluid terrain—migrants moving in and out of the shelter in their transits—and therefore one of the main challenges while collecting data was being to carry out long-term observations or interviews with the same respondents. Furthermore, respondents (both smugglers and migrants) were often in highly vulnerable positions due to their lack of status within Mexico and the clandestine nature of their journey. There was also a significant institutional dimension: the fact that smugglers were technically not allowed to remain within the shelter, although they made themselves “pass” for migrants to watch over their clients and perhaps generate additional business, which often led to tense interactions between the smugglers and the shelter’s staff. Together these dynamics constituted an “uncomfortable fieldwork” environment (Hume and Mulcock 2004, xxiii), where I simultaneously performed the role of a volunteer and researcher inside the shelter. My dual roles often became entangled in the trust-building processes required in research and my ability to carry out my volunteer work.

FIGURE 1
Mexico-Guatemala Border



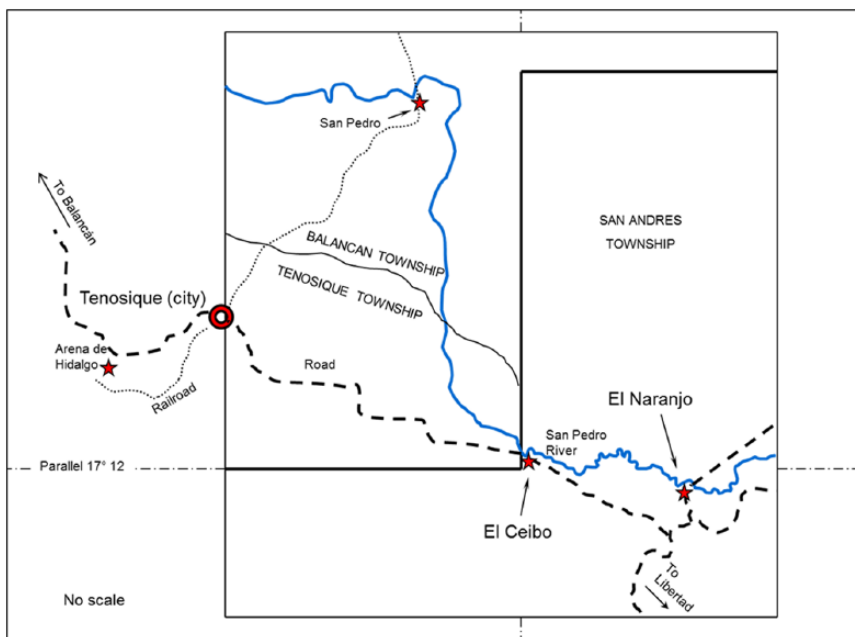
SOURCE: Arriola Vega (2014). Reprinted with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Beyond these methodological considerations, the “social environment” (Vigh 2006, 12), that is, the unfolding topography of the smuggler-migrant interactions and how they take place during their shared trajectories, must be described. For that, one must detail the geopolitical landscape of Mexico’s southern border and its key role in South-North migratory flows.

Mexico’s *Other* Southern Border: The Tenosique-Petén Borderlands

Mexico’s southern border (see Figure 1) is approximately 1,139 kilometers long, of which 962 kilometers border with Guatemala and 176 with Belize.³ The Suchiate and Usumacinta rivers traverse along half of the border (Kauffer Michel 2010, 32). Simultaneously, 87 percent of the border between Mexico and Belize is demarcated by the Hondo River (García García and Kauffer Michel 2011, 145). The jungle, rainforests, swamps, and bodies of water extend beyond the limits of Mexico into Central America, creating a porous and shifting border.⁴

FIGURE 2
The Tenosique-Petén Border



SOURCE: Arriola Vega (2014). Reprinted with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

For decades, Central American migratory flows into Mexico, the United States, and Canada, currently estimated at four hundred thousand per year,⁵ have primarily gone through the crossing point of Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecún Uman, which connects the southern Mexican state of Chiapas with Guatemala. This corridor has been historically the most often discussed in analyses of Central American migration. The experiences of migrants crossing into Mexico through the Mexican states of Tabasco, Campeche, and Quintana Roo (about seven hundred kilometers to the north) have remained virtually unexamined. The region where this project was conducted is a section of the border known as the Tenosique-Petén borderlands (see Figure 2). It covers sixty kilometers along the Mexico-Guatemala border, connecting the state of Tabasco in Mexico with Guatemala’s Petén.

The Tenosique-Petén section is the second busiest crossing by Central American migrants (Arriola Vega 2012, 184). Although officially there is only one border checkpoint managed by the Mexican authority in charge of immigration in this region, the El Ceibo checkpoint, there are at least five other informal border crossing points in the area (Arriola Vega 2012, 186). Along this stretch of the borderland, the city of Tenosique plays an important role as a transit city for

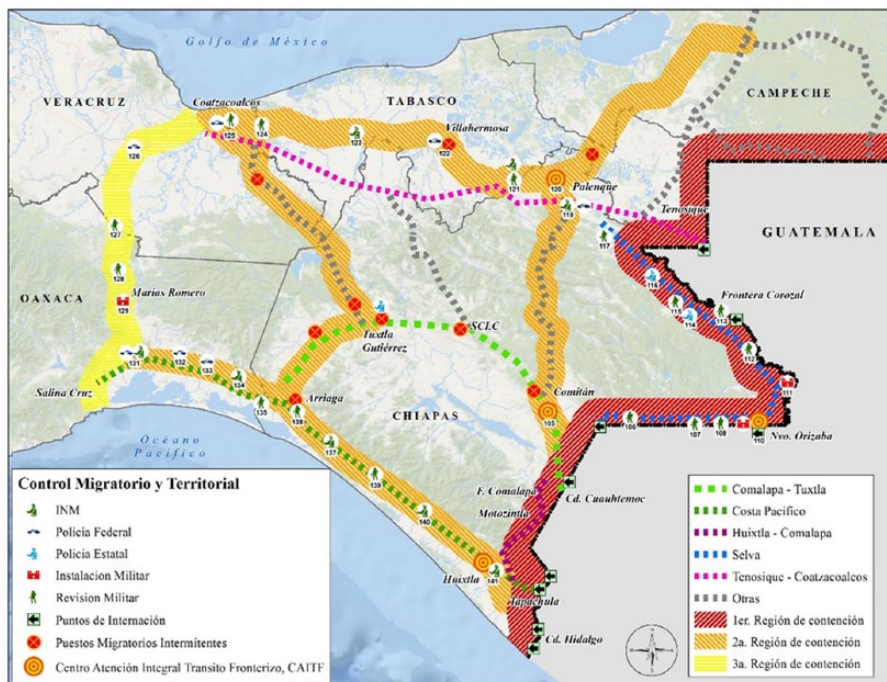
migrants. It is the first city on the Mexican side of the border. It is also here where migrants get atop of the cargo train (known as *La Bestia*) heading toward the U.S. southern border. These factors make Tenosique-Petén fundamental when exploring the effects of the immigration enforcement policies at the local level, and the responses and practices of those who participate in the migration industry.

The geopolitical dimension of the Tenosique-Petén borderlands: Reshaping trajectories in uncertain terrains

Migration scholars identify a series of events as critical in the transformation of undocumented migration patterns into Mexico from Central America. Perhaps the most prominent is the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the United States, and Mexico in 1994 (Ángeles Cruz 2010), followed by the reinforcement of the Mexico-U.S. border after the 9/11 attacks (Arriola Vega 2012). The war against drug trafficking in Mexico, which was publicly declared in 2006 by then-Mexican president Fox (Basok et al. 2015), and the international agreements between Mexico and the United States to “seal” the southern Mexican border through economic development programs (Casillas 2007; Sandoval Palacios 2011), also shaped migration flows and routes in response to border militarization and enforcement. Other factors such as crime levels in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Castillo 2010); environmental and natural catastrophes in El Salvador and Honduras (Rivas Castillo 2010); and the exploitation of natural resources by mining and bioenergy companies in the entire Central American region (Sandoval Palacios 2001) have also been cited as factors in the outflows of Central American migrants into Mexico seeking to reach the United States. In addition, Mexico’s national immigration enforcement and control initiatives backed by the United States’ government (namely Plan Sur Program in 2001 and Southern Border Program in 2014) as well as international aid and development programs (Proyecto Mesoamérica in 2001 and the Merida Initiative in 2007) have led to increased restriction of Mexico’s southern border (see Figure 3), prompting continued creation and reconfiguration of routes of passage by migrants (see Figure 4). The need to avoid border controls has led those seeking to enter Mexico to venture into more remote mountains and away from main roads and highways, exposing migrants to significant risks ranging from environmental exposure, physical and sexual assaults, abuse at the hands of the authorities, kidnappings, and even death. In fact, multiple organizations have raised concerns over the increased number of reported deaths and disappearances of migrants in transit through Mexico (Amnistía Internacional 2012; CNDH 2011).

While the precariousness of Mexico’s migratory landscape has led to research seeking to understand “how geopolitics shape and animate the everyday experiences of clandestine migration journeys” (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016, 244), some social actors have received more attention than others because of the way they are construed and/or represented in the rhetoric of border security. In representing the facilitation and restriction of migrants’ journeys, smuggling

FIGURE 3
 Migratory and Territorial Controls along the Guatemala-Mexico Border



SOURCE: Paz Carrasco, Cerda García, and Ledón Pereyra (2016).

facilitators or coyotes often predominate. While they are often depicted as unscrupulous characters who cheat migrants of their money and victimize them physically and emotionally, growing literature suggests that coyotes are invested in the provision of efficient and safe services because of their desire to continue business and to protect their own safety (Sanchez 2015; Spener 2009; Galemba 2013). As facilitators of mobility, coyotes develop and implement passing strategies to assist their clients in reaching their desired destinations. In the Tenosique-Petén borderlands, they negotiate journeys with migrants, serve as interlocutors with institutions and networks, and are aware of the ever-changing dynamics in the entire southern border, their home.

The Tenosique-Petén migration industry

While *coyote* is used here as a blanket term to designate any individual engaged in the facilitation of migration journeys, there are other ways to facilitate a journey, other types of facilitators, and facilitators with different tasks, and they vary in “cost, complexity, availability, security and probability of success” (Spener 2008, 132). In my fieldwork at La 72 migrants traveled primarily with the help of

FIGURE 4
Transit Cities



SOURCE: Paz Carrasco, Cerda García, and Ledón Pereyra (2016).

coyotes and guides. Coyotes are known for providing a full-service package, which includes the facilitation of journeys across Mexico and into specific destinations within the United States from the place of origin or residence of the migrant. Few migrants travel in this all-inclusive way, though, because of cost: coyote-led door-to-door journeys are quite expensive. During the period in which this research was carried out, the prices of such all-inclusive packages ranged between 4,000 and 6,000 U.S. dollars. This service involves finding and contracting a reliable (i.e., successful) smuggler with known access to a network of brokers who can in turn ensure a relatively smooth journey for the migrant. These services are usually hired and paid for by friends and/or family members of the migrant who already reside in the United States (Hagan 2008). The high price of this kind of comprehensive service makes it virtually inaccessible to most migrants (Sanchez 2015), who must instead rely on guides who cover specific segments of their journeys or they must forgo all forms of guidance or help.

Most Central American migrants staying at La 72 reported relying on the segmented facilitation, where they relied on a guide (*guía* in Spanish) to lead them through specific portions of their journeys. *Guías* are typically local residents of the Tenosique-Petén corridor with knowledge of the terrain. They also tend to

have legal residence permits for one or more countries in the region (in the case of the Tenosique-Petén corridor, most guides interviewed were citizens or residents of Guatemala, Belize, or Mexico), which allowed them to travel with no restrictions across the border. The guides' role is to walk migrants across short distances and help them avoid immigration controls.

Since most migrants rely on the segment-based option, it is important to describe how and where it operates. While guides do in fact play a fundamental role in their facilitation, clandestine journeys rely on a larger logistics structure comprising accommodations, food, and transportation services, alongside brokers such as taxi drivers, hotel owners, and boat operators. In the Tenosique-Petén corridor, the town of Santa Elena, on the Guatemalan side of the border, constitutes an important migration industry hub. As migrants arrive into town, they are approached by taxi drivers who offer their transportation services. Drivers recommend specific hotels or accommodations to their customers, receiving in turn a commission based on the amount of business they bring in. Hotels also serve as brokerage points for those who arrive without a guide. Once at a hotel, migrants in transit can select from a vast range of options, including accommodations, meals, transportation toward the border with Mexico, and assistance crossing the southern border, mainly to Tenosique or Palenque (both cities on the Mexican side of the border) for a fee. For example, Felipe,⁶ his wife, Francheska, and their two young children arrived in Santa Elena from Honduras seeking to cross into Mexico. At a hotel, Felipe and his family were offered services, since the owner had agreements with both coyotes and guides. Felipe and his wife explained:

We took a bus directly to Santa Elena, we stayed there for like 2 or 3 days in a hotel, and from there we came here to the place of *El Manco*.⁷ He crosses people over there by El Naranjo.

... We got to Santa Elena and I remember that we arrived at the hotel, and asked "How much for a bed?" "Per night? 100 quetzales," said the owner. "Ok," I said, "give me four beds, one bed each." "Ok," the owner said, "the rooms come with a fan."⁸ We stayed there that night. The following night we were still there because the owner was helping us set up a ride to get us from [there] to El Naranjo, with a man they call *El Manco*.⁸

Other migrants skip the hotel in Santa Elena with the hope of finding a "good deal" that can fit their budget. That was the case for Jorge and his brother, who avoided the hotel in search of a guide who offered a package to get them across the river. Jorge's experience is another example of the segment-based option that many migrants use:

It only took us three days to get [to Tenosique]. We crossed through El Pedregal, by boat. I would say it is about two hours from here by boat. You just have to get to El Naranjo and there are some boatmen. The same boatmen have rooms for rent for the night. We took the bus right before El Naranjo; we arrived there around 5 or 6 pm. We wanted to take the *marianela*⁹ so we started looking for a way to cross. One guy told us it would be 30 quetzales¹⁰ to cross, but another one offered us a better price. The said, "Hey guys, just because you are from Guatemala. You are from here, so it will be very

cheap: 10 quetzales for each one of you, including the boat. We arrange everything for you by tomorrow morning, you will have to pay just a little more [to the boatman] and we will transport you all the way to El Pedregal, all the way across the border! Moreover, we will include the truck to get you there and the other truck once you are on the other side, all for the same price!" So I told him it was ok, and we traveled with him.¹¹

There is, as these testimonies indicate, a solid infrastructure supporting migrants and their needs. Guides, hotel owners, taxi drivers, and coyotes all operate as brokers, being more than "simply nodes in a network which bridge two yet unconnected nodes by just passing on information" (Faist 2014, 39).

The Migrant Shelter as Smuggling Hub

Another fundamental node in this chain is the one constituted by migrant shelters. Facilitators and migrants often resort to these humanitarian aid institutions to rest, secure medical care, or obtain food. Simultaneously, facilitators act as brokers between migrants and humanitarian aid institutions within migrant shelters, connecting networks to increase the success of their clients and for their business.

Most migrant shelters do not allow coyotes and guides into their facilities; they consider facilitators exploitative and abusive, and likely to cause conflicts. As a result, coyotes often pretend to be migrants in transit themselves to be allowed into the shelter. Once in the shelter, the coyote may reconfigure a migrant's journey, especially in light of immigration enforcement controls, or he or she may even connect clients with other facilitators. El Pelón, a coyote, described the following segment of the route to his clients while at the shelter:

Look, things are difficult right now. So, we will have to do the following. ... Some of you are coming with me, and the others, well I am dealing with my *compas* (trusted friends), they are people who have my trust, they are *compas*, they are people of their word. It is getting very hard to cross right now, so we cannot go more than five people at the time. Let me arrange things and see when they can pick up you [points to four others]. You would have to leave [the shelter] and meet [my friends] outside, they cannot pick up you here, but I'll give you the details, you know, you have all my contact details. In a little while I'll tell you how *the move* [*la movida*] is going to be.¹²

As the quote illustrates, coyotes use their stays at the shelters to secure new clients and to organize new stages or rounds of services. Migrant shelters draw new social horizons, that is, "spaces of possibilities and spheres of orientation that constantly arise in the interaction between agents in motion and the shifting social and political circumstances they seek to move within (Vigh 2006, 30).

Migrant shelters are also places of conflict. They become spaces where migrants can share with others through conversations and gossip their perceptions of specific coyotes. Shelters are in fact difficult spaces for facilitators to navigate, as they provide on one hand the respite they often need and opportunities for future business, but, on the other, the possibility of running into their competitors, also eager to profit from the presence of migrants and their oft-scarce resources.

Perceptions of specific ethnicities as being more reliable than others come into play in the micro-cosmos of the shelter, where migrants may stop relying on a specific coyote and turn to another perceived as able to provide better services and improved chances of success. Among migrants in my sample, Mexican coyotes and guides were perceived as more reliable than Guatemalan or Honduran facilitators. Mexican coyotes know they can benefit from the bad reputation of their Central American counterparts, and do their best to maintain the tensions around this imaginary, consequently improving their chances of generating business. During a conversation at La 72, Felipe shared:

Do you remember El Tico [from Costa Rica]?⁹ He was bringing people all the way to Villa. But then La China found out and unleashed a war of rumors against him. Some say that she threatened him and that is why he is leaving soon. But she told her clients to tell the staff at the shelter that he was a coyote. I think he is losing his clients, because now they say they came to find out he is not as experienced and that he does not know the route well.¹³

In addition to the tensions that emerge among facilitators in the struggle to retain clients, facilitators face another challenge: the very existence of borders and migration controls. During a negotiation between a migrant and a facilitator in Santa Elena, I witnessed an exchange in which Alonso, a facilitator, positioned himself as the best option for potential clients aspiring to cross into Mexico:

I charge you US\$1,000, but that journey is guaranteed. From [Santa Elena] to Tenosique, all the way through the border checkpoint, but it is guaranteed. You will find no muggings, no immigration controls. We will be heading to El Naranjo with the trucks, across the border, everything. You stay here, you don't go out anymore. I bring you everything you need, food, etc. I will tell you which clothes to put on so you are well prepared. Your friend is going to have to cut his hair and he can't wear that hat he has on. We are going to leave at 3 am.¹⁴

Alonso's testimony reflects his awareness of the difficulties in migrating resulting from migration control policies within the Mexican territory, the likelihood of violence along the migration journey, and exposure to harsh physical environments. Yet simultaneously, he situates his knowledge of these challenges as an advantage: he can secure the supplies that are needed for the journey, and can even help them change their appearance to improve their chances of a successful and uneventful crossing. It is clear from his sales pitch that Alonso recognizes the "social terrain" as "being at times a non-transparent social topography, at other times fluid and in continual movement and at yet other times volatile and explosive" (Vigh 2006, 12).

Coyotes must acknowledge the challenges likely to occur during migrants' journeys, while providing evidence of how they are effective at counteracting their impact. They recognize that migrants are deeply aware of the risks inherent to the journeys and are seeking facilitators who can provide protection. Offering their services cannot simply involve promises, but rather evidence of how the risks inherent to the journey have been overcome in the past. The conversation between Rubén and "El Manco" attests to these negotiations:

Rubén: So, the amount includes checkpoints? Because at the shelter we heard there are currently four checkpoints from Tenosique to Villa.

El Manco: Everything is included. Checkpoints, la migra,¹⁵ and password for El Norte.¹⁶ You have to give me one half [of the fee] here and the other half when we arrive; the crossing into United States is not included. I can give you some contacts, but I don't cross personally.

Rubén: OK, OK. But I need to go through Mexico City, I don't want to cross through Tamaulipas. Some friends told me that Mexico City is easier and safer.

El Manco: Yes, but the bribes to the *migra*¹⁷ and the federal police have increased on that route, there is more control now because everybody is using that route. If you want to use Mexico City it is OK, but then is not the price I told you yesterday.¹⁸

The dialogue between El Manco and Rubén attests to the knowledge that migrants have of the dynamics along migration routes, and of the multiple complexities that smugglers face in the provision of their services. The facilitation, particularly along the Mexican landscape, does not merely involve the transportation process; rather, it requires navigating the landscape of authorities that can be bribed along the way and especially along the safest or fastest routes, which are also known and requested by migrants. Access to these areas involves higher costs not only for the migrants who seek to cross them, but also for the facilitators.

Migrants often describe coyotes as intentionally scamming their clients. On one occasion, four migrants shared their concern about a coyote with whom they had been "in conversations" during the last few days. They had given him money in advance, and two days later he disappeared and had not returned to the shelter:

We were in negotiations already for a few days ago, because well my friend came here with a coyote, but he abandoned him here. So we met another one in here, and we heard from others that he had already crossed several people and he had not failed. He even knows the other coyote that left my friend here, and he told us that that one was a cheater and that's why he usually offers low prices. We thought he was honest because some people in my city know him, and well we gave him an advanced payment, but it's already been four days since then and he has not showed up, and we're all worried because each of us gave him US\$400. And well, we already feel kind of mistrust because if he does not appear what are we going to do?¹⁹

Scams like the one Ángel and his friends experienced are common. Many smugglers do take advantage of the vulnerability of migrants and create elaborate schemes that lead unsuspecting clients to believe in routes or services that do not exist. Scammers take advantage of the inability of migrants to report the crimes committed against them to the authorities.

While some smugglers do profit from the trust of their clients and refuse to abide by the terms of their verbal agreements, smuggling services are on many occasions impacted by enforcement controls, ramped up security, or interruptions to the chain of contacts that allow them to carry out business in the region. Responding to the challenges they encounter, smugglers have adapted. At La 72, some facilitators offered border crossing packages that included multiple crossing attempts. If the migrant was detained by immigration authorities, robbed along the way, or extorted by drug trafficking organizations, becoming unable to

complete the journey, he or she could contact the facilitator after to use his or her additional travel “credits.” Most facilitators delivered on their promises, and once their clients had crossed the Tenosique-Petén region, they connected them with other facilitators for the remaining segment of their journeys.

That was the case for Beatriz, who left Honduras with her sister and hired a coyote to take them all the way to Mexico’s northern border. Both sisters were arrested by Mexican immigration authorities during their journey and were deported back home. As soon as they arrived in Honduras, they contacted the coyote to use their credit for a second attempt. On this occasion, the sisters reached La 72 in the company of the facilitator. Having attempted twice to move his group of migrants from the shelter, the coyote decided that the conditions were not optimal for the journey given ongoing migratory controls. This decision, of course, was made to the dismay of the people he was transporting, including Beatriz. She described her experience:

I don’t know if I should continue or I should go back to Honduras and forget this idea of going to Houston. But I also made an effort to get the money, and also the first time that we traveled [Mexican immigration] got us. You have no idea ... I wanted to die, it was my first time going to jail and the immigration officers are nasty! We got deported and tried again. This time [the coyote] told us to wait here in the shelter, and then he said he was going to divide the group. He took just some of us; my sister and I stayed. And then he came back twice [to the shelter] with more people. Eventually he said he was not going to take us anymore because of the [enforcement conditions] but then he said he neither was going to give us our money back. And what can I do? I cannot go to the police and say “I want my money back because I paid thousands of pesos to the coyote.”²⁰

While most literature on migration attributes the unwillingness of smuggling facilitators to fulfill service agreements or promises to an almost preternatural desire to hurt or take advantage of their clients, or to simply profit financially, many other factors and actors constrain the ability of coyotes to effectively deliver services. In the context of Mexico, informal or unexpected checkpoints set up by the National Immigration Institute or INM (the federal agency in charge of immigration controls); changes in the usual staff members at surveillance or control points; the increased activity of groups involved in robberies, kidnappings, and extortion; and the activities of drug trafficking organizations along migratory routes often impede facilitators from providing the most basic of services. Omoa, a Central American migrant, shared his experience:

I was almost in Reynosa, I had everything. The coyote already had told me which password I should give, everything. But the problem was the opposite cartel stopped our bus, and well ... everything went to hell. They took us and got out of the bus ... me and other three, we stayed in a house for 12 days, they beat us, they tortured us. ... I did not understand if the coyote fooled me, or if something happened to him because I did not hear from him afterwards. I did not want to give my mom’s number because they were going to ask for ransom, but there was a lot of torture. The good thing is that one day after I gave them the phone number, there was a federal police raid and then when they came in some of us were able to run away. Neither cops nor Zetas, I lived.²¹

The risks related to entering into spaces controlled by states or by criminal organizations are also taken into consideration by coyotes, who are also likely targets of violence. While described primarily as perpetrators, it is common for facilitators to be among those being kidnapped, arrested, or extorted in their attempts to smuggle their groups. Some smugglers have reduced their risk by entering into agreements with those who control routes or access to specific segments of the migrant trail. In some cities of northern Mexico, drug trafficking organizations have access to migration routes and impose fees that must be covered up front by smugglers, even if the amount is then passed on to migrants. This tax, referred to in the literature as *piso* (Slack and Campbell 2016; see also Slack and Martinez, this volume), allows migrants and facilitators to travel and operate without fear of violence. Attempting to travel through parts of Mexico that the drug traffickers control without paying *piso* may be counterproductive for smugglers, who can face threats of violence, assaults, and, in some cases, homicide. There are also some reports of coyotes being forced to involuntarily work with criminal groups, or assaulted and even murdered by organized crime members (see O'Leary 2012; Izcara Palacios 2015).

The narratives of abusive and exploitative smugglers must be interpreted with caution, as decisions to move onward or to altogether cancel a journey often take place within the much larger context of border security and immigration controls, in turn embedded in larger dynamics of risk and violence. Smugglers are often faced with having to make decisions for the safety of the group, even against the will of specific clients, who may feel cheated or lied to (Hagan 2008). While some migrants may opt to return home, others will continue on their journeys with the assistance of other facilitators, often despite warnings from the original coyote about security conditions and an increased likelihood for victimization.²²

It is common to find migrants who have become coyotes themselves because of their multiple failed attempts to cross the border.²³ In this sense, migrants also become agents of knowledge and develop strategies that draw from their own experience and that allow other migrants to achieve the goals that they did not reach.

It was hard. Living in the street, under bridges, my *padrino* [godfather] was my coyote. He didn't abandon me, I [just] didn't have luck to get in to the U.S., but I can say he did his best. Maybe God wanted me to stay here in Mexico, I am happy; nowadays I can help my fellow citizens. I have [Mexican] residence now, I can go back and forth, while they can't. I learned very important things at a time when I was very naïve, when I tried to cross with my *padrino*.²⁴

Previous crossing experiences become important resources of knowledge. For Mariana, who tried unsuccessfully to cross into the United States on at least four occasions, her "failures" were the most important tools to achieve her permanent residence. She fled Guatemala due to gender discrimination because of her sexual orientation and tried to get to the United States. On the first two attempts she relied on smugglers' services, one of whom was her godfather, but after the first two attempts she felt confident enough to embark on the journey alone. While living in La 72, Mariana found out she could apply for refugee status in Mexico.

Her application was initially denied. On her fourth attempt she was approved and was able to secure permanent residence in Mexico. Today she works crossing migrants from south to north Mexico. The networks and ties that she has acquired in the process of her migration allowed her to help others.

Conclusion

Mexico's southern border has for generations been crossed by Central American migrants in their attempts to reach the United States. Current migration controls and border enforcement policies on the part of the Mexican government, alongside geopolitical changes, in the Central American region have led to changes not only in migration flows from Central America, but also in the development of a local industry of migration along the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands. In this article I discussed the case of the Tenosique-Petén corridor, which, located to the north of the most commonly studied border crossing of Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecun Uman, registers a high volume of border crossings and of irregular migration facilitation.

As the constraints posed to human mobility by border control and immigration enforcement along Mexico's southern border have increased, the role of border crossing facilitators has become fundamental in securing safe passages. While smuggling facilitators or coyotes are known for their role in the provision of reliable, fast, and effective mobility services, they are also often described as *persona non grata* who abandon, betray, and kidnap migrants in transit, the latter of whom are often portrayed as naïve and easy to manipulate. My empirical data indicate that the interactions that emerge among migrants and those behind their journeys are far from what that dichotomy implies. Migrants are not only aware and knowledgeable of the many challenges associated with their journeys; they are active, engaged agents in the identification of smuggling services. Furthermore, the smuggler-migrant dynamic goes beyond a financial transaction. Both parties play the roles of confidant, partner, and employer for each other, becoming invested not merely financially but also in terms of securing each other's well-being.

Migrants as well as smugglers are often forced to interrupt their trajectories by the challenges they encounter—enforcement, robberies, and injury to name a few. Migrant shelters across Mexico are fundamental in the process of remapping a path forward. Shelters do provide a safe and secure space away from agents such as the police and criminal organizations and the risks they pose. However, they are also a place of business, where smuggling facilitators and migrants can interact and strategize. The safety associated with the shelter allows both smugglers and migrants to improve their chances for success, through the identification of better-suited smugglers, new contacts, and advice from other people on the move. But they are also locations where conflict and tension can emerge, as smugglers compete for clients. Both smugglers and migrants must therefore devise practices of negotiation and resistance to benefit from their interactions.

Migrants and smugglers are agents that have responded to the new politics of persecution and restraint of migratory flows. Challenges to mobility have led to the creation of new tendencies and strategies for clandestine border crossing. The once-established transit routes, mostly demarcated by the cargo train railroads, have changed; crossing prices have increased as militarization and enforcement of borders have escalated. And the nature of the interactions between migrants and smugglers has changed as well. While violence against smugglers and migrants are an ordinary occurrence, some migrants have become smuggling facilitators themselves.

Finally, it is important to underline that daily exchanges between migrants and their crossing facilitators constitute social negotiations, through which these actors cultivate and enrich their agency. The analysis of their interactions allows us not only to reformulate the habitual narratives and imaginaries of the smuggler-migrant dynamic within the migratory corridors around irregular migration, but also to understand how border enforcement and immigration control mechanisms affect practices and contestations between social actors involved at the local level in the migration industry. Without romanticizing the complex dynamics between these groups, it is crucial to explore smugglers' role as transit-knowledge brokers as well as intermediaries who mitigate migrants' risks along their journeys. As such, smugglers play a role too important to be considered solely criminal or deviant.

Notes

1. See <https://www.wola.org/es/2015/06/mexico-ahora-detiene-mas-migrantes-centroamericanos-que-los-estado-unidos/>; <https://www.wola.org/analysis/haiti-crossroads-understanding-current-political-impasse/>.

2. I opted not to give a pseudonym to the shelter where I carried out my fieldwork as La 72 Hogar-Refugio para personas migrantes is well known in the migration literature as a research hotspot and has been identified by multiple other researchers in the course of their work. The names and nicknames used in the article, however, do not reflect the real names of the respondents.

3. The length of Mexico's southern border varies across authors. Some authors put it at 1,139 kilometers, while others estimate it at 1,149 or even 1,225 kilometers (Kauffer 2010, p. 40).

4. Here I draw from Benedikt Korf's notion of the "permeability or hardness of the border" (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013). He proposes that institutions and power relations around borderlands determine those border's characteristics. I use porous or porosity to clarify that negotiations between the diverse power relations taking place in these borderlands are flexible, unstable, and filterable, but also to emphasize that geographically and geopolitically entangled conditions play a central role in border trade practices.

5. The statistics on the number of undocumented migrants who cross the southern border are unknown. The complexity of mobility dynamics and their resulting conditions further complicate accuracy. Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Migración (National Migration Institute) provides the number of monthly and annual arrests, yet there are gaps in these statistics. For example, a person can be detained several times in a single month or year.

6. All interviewees' names were anonymized.

7. A man missing an arm.

8. Felipe, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, México, November 2014.

9. A small boat or dingie.

10. Quetzales are the Guatemalan currency.

11. Jorge, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, México, November 2014.
12. El Pelón, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, México, November 2015.
13. Felipe, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, México, November 2014.
14. Alonso, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Santa Elena, Guatemala, February 2015.
15. The colloquial term used to designate the authorities in charge of immigration.
16. Mexican northern cities. Routes of undocumented migration in Mexican northern cities are usually controlled by drug trafficking organizations and therefore migrants need a “password” (provided commonly by their facilitator) to avoid kidnapping or extortion.
17. Immigration authorities.
18. Rubén y El Manco, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, México, February 2015.
19. Ángel, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, Mexico, March 2015.
20. Beatriz, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, Mexico, September 2014.
21. Omoa, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, México, September 2014.
22. There is a correlation between distance and the vulnerability migrants face. The farther one person is from home, the more likely he or she will be to encounter violence, as the ties between the person in transit and the smuggler who was originally hired to provide services and his or her networks become weaker. In other words, the level of safety a smuggler can provide is related to the proximity of his or her home and social capital. See Majidi, this volume.
23. The participation, or rather the migrant to smuggling facilitator continuum, has been identified by Achilli (2016) in the case of Syrian smuggling facilitators; while Mengiste (2017), in his work on Eritrean smugglers, has also recognized the information that is shared among migrants in transit as constituting a form of knowledge, echoing Sanchez and Natividad (2017).
24. Mariana, interview by Yaatsil Guevara González, Tenosique, Tabasco, México, March 2015.

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