

Rumors, Encounters, Collaborations, and Survival: The Migrant Smuggling– Drug Trafficking Nexus in the U.S. Southwest

By
GABRIELLA E. SANCHEZ
and
SHELDON X. ZHANG

The violence afflicting the Mexican migration corridor has often been explained as resulting from the brutal takeover of migrant smuggling markets by organized crime, specifically Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). Through the testimonies of twenty-eight migrants who traveled with smuggling facilitators on their journeys into the United States and who interacted with drug traffickers during their transit, we argue that the metamorphosis taking place may be even more radical, involving the proliferation of actors with little or no criminal intent to operate along the migration trails. Far from market coalescence, the increasing flattening of criminal markets along the migration trail and the proliferation of individuals struggling to survive is the result of increasingly limited paths toward mobility and is not attributable to feared cartels or *traficantes* alone. The interactions among clandestine actors are not only likely to become more common but also to reflect flexibility and adaptation that hierarchical DTOs cannot explain.

Keywords: migrant smuggling; drug trafficking; U.S.-Mexico border; cartels; organized crime

Amid the global narratives of migration as a crisis, migrant smuggling facilitators have become popular, if infamous, characters. They

Gabriella E. Sanchez is a research fellow at the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute. A sociocultural anthropologist, she has conducted research on the internal dynamics of migrant smuggling facilitation in Latin America, the U.S.-Mexico border, North Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and Europe. She is the author of Human Smuggling and Border Crossings (Routledge 2015).

Sheldon X. Zhang is professor and chair at the School of Criminology and Justice Studies, University of Massachusetts, Lowell. His research primarily centers on transnational organized crime, migrant smuggling and human trafficking, and evaluation of offender re-entry programs in California. He has published and lectured extensively on these topics.

Correspondence: Gabriella.Sanchez@eui.eu

DOI: 10.1177/0002716217752331

tend to be depicted as the predatory and violent men who scam, kidnap, assault, or abandon helpless and desperate migrants across Mexico, the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Middle East. Their trade is often characterized in global reports as one of the most profitable illicit activities worldwide next to drug trafficking or the sex trade (Europol-Interpol 2016; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2017). In addition to allegedly providing high returns for its operators, smuggling organizations are described as sophisticated, evolving networks of transnational reach (Carrera and Guild 2016).

It is also common to come across references of migrant smuggling's ties to other illicit activities. The argument that two or more branches of the transnational criminal pantheon can come together is a common yet debated topic among criminologists (Zhang 2007). Some have linked smuggling to markets ranging from the weapon trade (Naim 2010) and sex trafficking (Europol-Interpol 2016) to the trafficking of nuclear material (Zaitseva and Steinhäusler 2014). Amid recent terrorist attacks in Europe, some authors have argued smuggling facilitators have helped Islamic terrorists groups infiltrate the European continent (Europol-Interpol 2016; Walt 2015), or that terrorist organizations finance their activities by funneling profits from migrant smuggling (Shelley 2014; Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime and Norwegian Center for Global Analysis [RHIPTO] 2015).

In the Americas, law enforcement, policy, and academic discourses have claimed Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have now entered the migrant smuggling market, drug cartels ousting long-standing smuggling operators and forcing the few who are left to work on their behalf (Slack and Campbell 2016; Olson 2016). According to this argument, DTOs now control the routes that once were migrant smugglers' turfs, generating profits that may soon, if not already, outpace those of the drug trade (Storen Weden 2016; Donnelly and Hagan 2014).

In what follows, we challenge the takeover narrative. Instead, we propose an alternative explanation concerning these markets' contacts and their meaning. We argue that far from constituting a case of criminal convergence, interactions between drug trafficking and migrant smuggling along the U.S.-Mexico border have escalated as a result of the War on Drugs and the criminalization of mobility, leading to the proliferation not of organized crime, but of individual actors along the clandestine trail who opt, not solely defined by force or choice, to perform criminalized tasks as part of their personal attempts to survive. The testimonies collected here indicate that DTOs and migrant smuggling groups are far from being exclusive or restricted networks led by people in static positions of power. Instead, barriers to participation are not high, which has allowed for the inclusion into both markets of a growing number of ordinary, poor, and vulnerable people with no criminal background and whose actions are driven by the desire to improve their lives.

Our analysis relies on the experiences of Central American and Mexican migrant men and women who, during their journeys across the U.S.-Mexico border, traveled with smuggling facilitators and who encountered and, in many cases, partnered with drug trafficking actors with the ultimate goal of reaching

their destination. Yet our analysis does not stop there. We argue that in the context of clandestine migration, migrants make collective as well as individual decisions to support, reject, or avoid the activities of actors they encounter along the way, to protect themselves and one another. Rather than indicators of market convergence we see in the interactions among drug trafficking facilitators, migrant smugglers, and migrants evidence of the development and deployment of complex processes of securitization from below (Sanchez 2018), rooted in strong notions of care and solidarity amid the increasing insecurity and precarity created by migration regimes and the “wars” against drugs and irregular migration.

While Mexican DTOs and their exploits have been well documented in popular and academic literature for decades, the Mexican War on Drugs has generated a lot of literature on the so-called Mexican cartels and their transgressions. Alongside it, there is also a corpus of research that has sought to shed light on the dramatic levels of migrant victimization along the U.S.-Mexico migration trail, which has generated widespread concern and led to international demands for an improved protection system across this corridor.¹ Many of these publications have argued that DTOs have taken over migrant smuggling, ousting long-standing operators in an attempt to extend their domain.

Less has been written about the potential reasons behind this transformation. So far, most commentators have argued that the coming together of drug trafficking and migrant smuggling is the concerted result of efforts on the part of drug trafficking actors to take advantage of migrants’ vulnerability and to cash in on the allegedly limitless profits of smuggling. Many have also argued that smuggling markets are becoming increasingly sophisticated and hierarchical. Some have used examples from journalistic coverage of migrant tragedies in drug trafficking territories in Mexico as clear indicators of the transformation, claiming these instances stand as evidence that drug trafficking is relying on its own violent tactics to take over smuggling markets.

While these claims may sound reasonable, especially amid the reports of unprecedented levels of violence on the U.S.-Mexico border, they make a series of assumptions about both markets that must be unpacked—namely, that different markets would come together, attracted by the prospect of financial returns and a business model to which both can ascribe. The claim of convergence also fuels the perception that all forms of irregular migration facilitation are the domain of monolithically organized criminal structures. However, the claim appears to ignore the testimonies of migrants who have been robbed at gunpoint by gangs comprising young people or *cholos*, kidnapped from safe houses and from their smuggling facilitators by *bajadores* or rip-off crews (Martinez and Sanchez 2013; Sanchez 2016), or abandoned along migrant trails by guides they thought were reliable (O’Leary 2016)—all acts by people whose ties to DTOs are not clear, if not altogether nonexistent (Spener 2009; Sanchez 2016; Izcara Palacios 2015). Furthermore, it also dismisses the findings from scholars around the world who have documented how many clandestine migration attempts are in fact carried out among friends, family members, humanitarian organizations,

or ordinary people, often for scant or no financial compensation (Carrera and Guild 2016; Ayalew, this volume; Maher, this volume).

The day-to-day experiences of the migrants who, in the course of their journeys, hear about drug traffickers, encounter them, and, on multiple occasions, even engage with them as part of their individual attempts to reduce the degree of precarity that both face are also sidelined amid the debate about the smuggling-trafficking convergence. Here we argue that the interactions between migrants and drug traffickers constitute examples of what Vogt (2016), in her work among migrants in Mexico, describes as “intimate, embodied and affective” interactions that “defy normative” and dichotomist “constructions” of criminals as predators and migrants as victims.

It is precisely because of these experiences that explanations solely focused on DTOs or smuggling organizations as coalescing agents behind the coercion, exploitation, and violence encountered by migrants should be considered suspect, as should the discourses that define migrants solely as passive entities. Analyses that unpack the smuggling–drug trafficking argument are needed. This article attempts to do so.

The Journey beyond the U.S.-Mexico Border

After the Mediterranean, the U.S.-Mexico border is the second most lethal route for migrants in the world. At least 6,915 people have died attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border between 1998 and 2016 (U.S. Border Patrol 2016). While there is no reliable border-wide count of the number of migrant fatalities along the U.S.-Mexico border, in the first 11 months of 2017 there were 341 migrant deaths recorded in the region (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2017, 79). The number of dead and missing migrants has remained constant despite the dramatic decrease in border apprehensions, which by 2017 had reached 1970s levels (Washington Office for Latin America [WOLA] 2017).

Migrants are not unaware of the risks involved in the journey and, whenever possible, hire smuggling facilitators who guide them through their journeys. Smuggling services of different quality and reach are sold along the migrant trail and are purchased by migrants or their families to secure a basic level of protection and to increase their chances of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and reaching U. S. destinations.²

The services of smuggling facilitators (while actors of dubious reputation) are consistently purchased with the intention of reducing the environmental, safety, and enforcement-related challenges along migrant journeys (see Martinez and Slack, this volume). In the case of the U.S.-Mexico corridor (see Guevara Gonzalez, this volume), stepped-up border enforcement and immigration controls have forced migrants and those who guide them to travel in inhospitable and remote areas. This risk is compounded by the existence of criminal actors who, aware of the unprotected nature of migratory paths, prey on those who travel along them, and engage in violence that ranges from intimidation and armed

robbery to kidnapping, sexual assault, and torture (Slack and Campbell 2016). Immigration controls and the individual actions of law enforcement agents are also known to put the lives of migrants at risk. There have been reported cases of migrants sustaining injuries or dying as a result of being chased by immigration officials, or of being denied medical assistance, food, or water, which have led U.S. immigration authorities to face legal charges (see Martinez, Cantor, and Ewing 2014).

Do Mexican DTOs play a role along the migration trail within U.S. territory? Data on this are scant. There is evidence—including in this piece—that Mexican drug traffickers carry out their smuggling attempts along many of the same routes followed by migrants once they have entered the United States. Yet U.S. authorities have been careful to describe this as evidence of coalescence, even when referring to migrant smuggling facilitators as cartels. U.S. politicians' allegations of the presence of Mexican DTOs or their collusion with other markets have often been called out as lies or moral panics seeking solely to spread the distaste for irregular migration.³

Literature on the drug trafficking–human smuggling nexus often makes reference to the victimization that migrants face during their journeys, most often in the form of physical aggression (Slack 2015; Slack and Whiteford 2011), forced labor (Servin et al. 2015), or both (Simmons, Menjivar, and Tellez 2015). This scholarship has also argued that these acts stand as evidence of the coming together of drug trafficking and smuggling organizations, or as the takeover of the migrant smuggling business by the more powerful DTOs (Slack and Campbell 2016; Schaefer and Gonzalez 2016). Researchers have also argued that migrant smuggling has become increasingly organized and structured in response to immigration and border enforcement controls (UNODC 2017), leading to the virtual extinction of individual and independent smuggling enterprises.

We provide an alternative explanation to these interactions: that a growing number of individual actors—rather than hierarchical, network-like organizations—have entered a structurally open market (that is, characterized by low-entry or no barriers to membership) as a result of the increasing precarity they face, resulting on one hand from neoliberal economic systems, and on the other hand from migration enforcement and criminalization regimes. Globally, these actors increasingly include men and women from marginalized groups who live along the migrant trail (Stone-Cadena and Alvarez, this volume), children and young people (Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción [DHIA] 2017; Palmer and Missbach 2017), and, most notably, migrants themselves (Achilli, this volume), whose roles do not discreetly fit the characterizations of criminal organizations. In sum, we argue that the experiences of clandestine migration facilitation must be analyzed as embedded in “a complex matrix of dependency and survival” (Vogt 2016, 367) in which actors are not merely ascribed to discrete organizations or solely seek financial profits.

When available, the data suggest that the incidence of intimidation, abuse, sexual harassment, assault, extortion, and forced recruitment along the migrant trail most often involves the interactions of migrants with their own smuggling facilitators, rip-off crews, gangs, and other migrants, rather than drug traffickers

who may have other market goals (Hagan 2008; Izcarra Palacios 2015; Spener 2009). A study of sixty-six migrant smuggling prosecutions in the state of Arizona—during the 2010s the main point of entry for irregular migrants and to this day one of the main points of entry for illicit drugs into the United States—also revealed the presence of nonviolent if frequent interactions between migrants and drug traffickers (Sanchez 2016). What do these encounters involve, and what do they tell us about the organization of smuggling and drug trafficking on the U.S. side of the migrant trail? In the sections that follow, we outline the interactions described by our respondents in the context of their journeys and hypothesize what they reveal.

Methods

This article is based on data collected via face-to-face qualitative, semistructured interviews conducted with four male and twenty-four female Mexican and Central American migrants who successfully crossed the U.S.-Mexico border with the assistance of smuggling facilitators along points of the U.S. southwest border (e.g., Arizona, New Mexico, and the westernmost corner of Texas). While the overall goal of the interviews was to document the gender dimensions of border crossing experiences, it soon became evident that the role of criminalized actors—particularly men involved in drug trafficking—constituted a critical element of the migratory experiences and even the survival of our respondents, leading us to explore this specific topic.

Initial interviews were carried out in spring and summer 2013 in a large city in the U.S. Southwest and relied on the critical assistance of Margarita,⁴ a 33-year-old Mexican member of the local immigrant community known for her work assisting recently arrived migrants with securing goods and services. Respondents included people known to her and their acquaintances, and others recruited via snowball sampling. All respondents were working-class migrants employed in the service and hospitality industries. They had crossed the border with the assistance of a smuggling facilitator or coyote, and had at some point along their journeys heard of, encountered, or collaborated with others involved in criminal activities, namely, drug trafficking.

No deception was used, and respondents were aware of the objective of the research. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. The data collected from the initial interviews were supplemented over the following 18 months via participant observation and informal interactions and conversations with respondents, their friends, and family members. We gathered informally at churches, libraries, schools, stores, and waterparks; during weekend outings to the mountains, at casinos, and places of employment. We met with the employers, neighbors, and coworkers of respondents knowledgeable of their border crossing experiences. This prolonged contact was also the result of frequent consultations with the researchers on the part of respondents via social media and over the phone on questions ranging from immigration related procedures—how to locate relatives

or friends who had been arrested or gone missing in the context of their border crossing journeys—to concerns about social services eligibility for their children and assistance with filling out medical forms and job applications. The data collected in the course of these interactions increased the trust and rapport among researchers and respondents and allowed for further data validation.

It is important to highlight that data presented here are not statistical in nature; they represent the experiences of only those who chose to be interviewed or who were interviewed through referrals and with whom contact was maintained. The data presented here, then, should not be interpreted as reflective of the experiences of all irregular migrants.

In what follows, respondents describe their encounters and collaborations with drug traffickers along their journeys. Some never came face-to-face with drug traffickers, even though they reported paying a fee to travel within the traffickers' territory. For others, their very survival depended on the intervention of people involved in drug trafficking. Still others, faced with accumulating debt emerging from failed crossing attempts, scams or robberies, opted to engage in drug trafficking activities to reach their destination. All three kinds of experiences are described below to explore what these experiences say about the smuggling and trafficking markets.

“La Mafia” and “El Piso”

The most commonly reported interaction between migrants and drug traffickers—and perhaps the only one pointing to the existence of a structured system of financial transactions connecting drug trafficking and migrant facilitators—involved the payment of *piso*, a one-time toll to access specific parts of the migrant trail under the control of a DTO. The payment of *piso* entitled migrants and their guides to, in theory, travel without fear. Margot, Leslie, and Malena described their understanding of the process:

Margot: Along the border, the ones who govern all that are the, the ... how are those called?

Leslie: La Mafia.

Margot: La Mafia?

Leslie: Yes, you only pay [la mafia] when you arrive with the coyote⁵ [to a specific point].

Margot: Yes, [the smuggler] gives [the fee] to the mafia.

Malena went on to describe how the female driver who was transporting her and her husband stopped to pay the fee prior to entering a specific route:

We were riding [in] an old van, and we took a dirt road. We were ... it was a like a desert. And out there, right in the middle of nowhere, you pass by a statue of a virgin, and that was where Mrs. Martha got out of the van and left the money. It was a small structure. It looked like a small shrine. [Mrs. Martha] left the money we had already given her there ... and when she got back in the van we drove off and she said, “We need to pay the quota, otherwise ... many have been killed.” But there was no one around. Nobody. She just left the money there and that was it.

The same way payment provided protection, lack of payment had potential implications. Testimonies suggest that the threat of violence, rather than violence itself, was sufficient motivation for guides and drivers to deposit their payment at prescribed locations. Reminders of what could happen to those who failed to follow the rules appeared to be strategically located. Margot stated:

Right ahead, just right after we had left the little shrine behind, you could see burned cars, flipped cars, and the *coyote* said that those belonged to those who had not paid their quota, that that had been the reason that they had gotten killed. And Mrs. Martha said, "If we don't pay, that is what they will do to us." But there were no people watching. She just left the money there and that was it.

The presence of burned and flipped cars were warnings to drivers and migrants alike that there were specific guidelines for traveling the route. That smuggling facilitators had to pay a fee to use the routes suggests that they did not work for the DTOs but simply paid a fee for the use of their routes.

None of the respondents reported violence from drug traffickers upon entering their territory and having paid the fee. But they disclosed instances when segments of the routes were off-limits to migrants and their smuggling facilitators or guides. Paloma, for example, attempted to reach a location in the Arizona desert with the help of a smuggling facilitator, but the *narcos* (the term she used to describe drug traffickers) did not allow her group to cross through. While they were threatened, they were never hurt:

Paloma: So this time we did not make it [either]. We headed back [to Mexico], but they [drug traffickers] knew we would come back, that we would try some other way; [so we tried again and] the trucks of the men with the drugs were there, and they had weapons, and [they said] that they would either shoot us or send us back. So pointing at us they got us all on the back of their truck and took us back to Sasabe, Sonora. We would walk so much and the *narcos* would send us back, because we couldn't [use that route].

Interviewer: All [three times] you ran into the *narcos*.

Paloma: The *narcos*.

Interviewer: It was not immigration.

Paloma: No. It was the *narcos*. It was just *narcos* what you'd see on the hill over there, so many of them. Three times the *coyotes* tried to get us through and we couldn't make it.

Paloma's experience suggests that drug traffickers prefer to keep migrants out of drug trafficking routes, most likely to avoid unwanted attention from law enforcement. Malena's group was eventually able to cross, and nobody was hurt. Yet the repeated warnings against crossing through a specific route further suggest a degree of differentiation among two separate illicit markets.

"They gave us some suitcases"

Reports of migrants being forced by drug traffickers to carry backpacks stuffed with drugs across the border (cf. Koslowski 2011; Slack and Campbell 2016; Burnett 2011; Leutert 2017) have been increasingly documented by researchers

over the last few years. These testimonies suggest that the practice is widespread and increasing along the border, and have been used to support of the argument that drug trafficking and migrant smuggling have converged (Mendez and Sanchez Dorame 2016; Donnelly and Hagan 2014).

In our study, respondents' testimonies indicated that the decision to carry drugs often was a personal, complex choice, rather than the result of coercion. Lacking financial resources to cover basic needs like room or board, or having run out of money after traveling vast distances and no longer able to afford smuggling fees, some migrants opted to assist drug traffickers in exchange for financial compensation or transportation within the United States. During a focus group, Avelina and Claudia described the experience of one of their acquaintances, Doña Elsa, a female migrant from Mexico in her 50s, who, unable to cover her smuggling fee following her deportation, relied on informal, indentured-like work to support herself, and ultimately accepted an offer to transport drugs with the hope of reaching her final destination in the United States:

Avelina: Doña Elsa, it's been a year since she got here.

Claudia: Yes, she is the one who came with my sister. She came across carrying a suitcase.

Avelina: Oh yes, that woman did suffer a lot. Claudia's sister went back home [after being unable to cross the border] but Doña Elsa, she said she would try again. And Doña Elsa's husband told her, well, you do that but [this time] you get the money yourself, I don't have money for another [crossing attempt]. And she did, right?

Claudia: Yes, she got a job at a garlic farm [on the American side of the border] so that she could come up with the money [and then try again]; she got hired there, in Ajo.⁶

Avelina: And it was there, that a guy at the farm told her, "I'll cross you, Doña." "Really?" she asked. "Really," he said. And he did.

Claudia: And then one day I just get this message on Facebook from Doña Elsa, right, that she wanted to be friends. And I befriended her and asked her, what's up Doña Elsa, how did you cross. And she said, "At the same spot where your sister and I wanted to cross." And I told her, "But that is where the *narcos* work, so was it carrying drugs?" And she said "No, no, they just told us not to bring anything with us, that they will give us food. And they gave us some suitcases," she said, "with food." But that was when I thought, what kind of food could that be? Well yes, in my opinion they were carrying drugs. She said she walked for about a day. But I wonder, can you imagine if [she and my sister] had been caught with the drugs? That is what people do out of desperation.

Avelina: But you also have to realize, it was not like she was going to tell you, right, yes, Claudia, I did it, I was able to cross the border because I crossed drugs. No way.

Claudia: Who knows ... perhaps she was just very lucky, or maybe, maybe when [migrants] carry [drugs] you are cared for better than when you are only a migrant, but by the time I spoke with her she was doing very well. [People who cross drugs] are cared for better, not like the *coyotes* who just throw you out so that they can distract [law enforcement] while they get another group across.

There was consensus among respondents that traveling with drug trafficking actors on occasion could translate into improved travel conditions, and even better treatment than with smuggling facilitators, since drug traffickers relied on

specific, faster routes inaccessible to smugglers. Traveling that way, however, implied different risks.

An 18-year-old male migrant from Mexico, Alfredo was apprehended while attempting to enter the United States with a smuggling facilitator. While held in immigration detention, he met two other young men who had heard about a pilot in the town of Nogales, Sonora, who flew migrants into Phoenix, Arizona, in the same light aircraft that he used to transport drugs. Alfredo considered traveling this way with the hope of arriving quicker to his sister's home in Salt Lake City. He explained:

Before we went there I called my sister and I asked her, "What do you think, should I go with him? He charges US\$4,000 to travel on a Cessna. You only have to jump [across the border] and run into a house and the owner of the house flies you. But he says he lands in Phoenix."

Alfredo and his sister considered the option, knowing he had already attempted to cross the border several times with no success. The journey appeared to be, in theory, fast and uneventful, and Alfredo wanted to arrive and start working, as the debt arising from unfulfilled border crossing attempts had increased with every try. Alfredo met with the pilot and discussed the conditions of the flight—it was then that he realized he would be flying next to a cocaine load that was to be delivered on a clandestine landing strip in the outskirts of Phoenix. Fearing the repercussions of a journey of this nature, he ultimately opted not to cross the border that way:

I called my sister back and I told her: "Nah, they have explained us now how it works. It involves a lot of risk. It sounds good but can you imagine, if I fly and when I get off right there [law enforcement] arrests me? Can you imagine how many years [in prison] I would get?" And so my sister said, "No, forget it, just stay [in Nogales]. I will wire you money and you go back home."

Alfredo's story indicates how individual drug traffickers—rather than organizations—may rely on the same resources they use for drug trafficking for the facilitation of migrant smuggling. Yet again, these efforts appear to be made independent of any organizational or leadership demands. While it could be argued that the pilot was operating in secret, there was no indication that the services he provided were, as his name and address were of common knowledge among migrants.

The race for survival

It was not uncommon for respondents to narrate instances in which their lives were at risk. All reported sustaining injuries ranging from scratches and cuts to sprains and broken bones. One drank stagnant water, ingesting in the process a life-threatening parasite that led to the loss of half of his liver. Mothers described tying their children to their bodies to avoid them being pulled by water currents. Some respondents also disclosed witnessing times when migrants decided they

were unable to continue; when friends and relatives opted to abandon someone unable to keep up; or the deaths of migrants as a result of falls, dehydration, or heatstroke.

In these narratives, smuggling facilitators played varying roles. While the actions of many did in fact match the dominant discourses that depict them as disregarding human life, many other times they appeared to be as vulnerable as the migrants they guided. Yet even more common were the references to the provision of care and support.

To think of smuggling facilitators along these lines may sound contradictory (Sanchez 2016, Vogt 2016), especially amid the narratives that systematically depict them as cruel and predatory. Yet smuggling, despite its labels, is at its core a primal attempt to preserve life; and in that sense, it should not come as a surprise that alongside death and violence, acts of solidarity, friendship, and even love emerge among those who experience extraordinary vulnerability. People spoke of the times they had come together to support and care for each other. There were examples of young men whose wounds were nursed by other men and of women who carried the children of other women too weak to walk. One woman described how the men in her group would form a circle around her so that she could sleep during a stop (she was the only woman in the group of migrants). Middle-age or elderly women often pretended to be the mothers of younger women traveling alone so that they would not be harassed by other migrants or separated from the group in the event they were apprehended by U.S. immigration.

It was in these extreme conditions that many migrants reported encountering drug traffickers, some of whom had scant if any advantage over migrants and whose very survival was also compromised by enforcement and the environment. Respondents identified multiple instances in which even under this high level of stress they were able to provide and receive assistance from others, including people involved in drug trafficking.

Cynthia narrated a time when the group of migrants with which she was traveling encountered men carrying drugs who were being chased by law enforcement:

[We saw] the drug people trying to escape and the helicopters [flying] on top. The next day we were asleep in a cave and the drug people walked in and they asked us to give them food, and the people [sleeping] at the mouth of the cave said, "We don't have any" [and they said] "Yes you do, how would you be able to walk otherwise, we want you to give us what you have. We are asking nicely, or do you want us to do otherwise," and they took out the guns and the knives. One [of the men] said, "All of you ... open your bags and give us some of the food you have." But the helicopter was still searching for them outside and one of the [drug traffickers] came and told [the one threatening the group]: "Let's go. They still have a ways to go and we are on our way out. Leave them their food."

The actions of the people transporting drugs can be understood as a desperate attempt to secure food and water in the desert after having been chased for days. Ultimately, they left the cave emptyhanded; Cynthia's group did not see them again. The encounter was also another indicator of how, rather than working

together, smugglers and drug traffickers merely use the same routes. They frequently face similar challenges and threats to survival, but this is not an indication of their markets merging.

Rosa also had an encounter with *narcos* during one of her crossings. Her words again reflect how defenseless people traversing the desert clandestinely can be, regardless of who they are:

Interviewer: So you did get to see the *narcos*.

Rosa: From quite up close! Too close. Too much. Some ... there are some who are like the [smuggling] guides. They are good people. That one time when we were hiding, they were too; they come to you; if they have food they share it, and if not, they ask that you share and you do. All the food we had left was a tiny can of tuna. One of those really little ones. And they had water. Well, guess what: all of us ate from that can, and we shared the water. That was how we survived.

Analysis: Crowded Illicit Marketspace on the Border

Our field data do not support the claim that migrant smuggling and drug trafficking have converged into a single market. Such a hypothesis fails to reflect the rich range of interactions that take place among people—whether migrants, drug traffickers, or smugglers—once they have entered the United States. Most importantly, such a hypothesis makes assumptions about the structure of both practices as monolithically organized and inherently prone to violence.

The data presented here confirm that on the U.S.-Mexico border, migrant smugglers and drug traffickers—most often, ordinary, working-class people operating independently, with no criminal background and no particular affiliation—do engage in transactional interactions of varying range, but do so mainly as a result of enforcement policies that have forced them into the most inhospitable and remote corridors of the border where their personal safety is often compromised. As a result, what we most often identified was a landscape where negotiation, trade, and partnerships—even if among unequal parties—often take place among actors who share the common goal of crossing the border undetected in order to survive; they share limited structural similarities or common goals beyond that.

Interactions between drug traffickers and migrant smugglers vary in range and nature, yet they are not solely exploitative or victimizing. While we do not suggest that no migrant has ever been the victim of these actors, our data serve as examples of the ways in which migrants and those who facilitate their journeys interact with other criminalized actors to better navigate the spaces where they coincide, and in so doing improve their chances of completing their journeys safely. This finding is of critical importance, as it suggests that despite the precarious conditions they face, migrants in the U.S. migration corridor and elsewhere can devise, negotiate, and mobilize strategies and mechanisms to improve their condition as irregular migrants in transit. As shown in our data, we also acknowledge that some migrants do find themselves in more vulnerable positions than others, and

that they are often at a disadvantage in relation to other actors along the trail. Yet by looking into the largely ignored cases when smuggling journeys are completed successfully and relatively uneventfully, as we did here, we found that coercion or intimidation were not as frequent or widespread as previously thought, and there were constant acts of care and solidarity taking place along the migrant trail. Here again, we do not intend to minimize the abuses experienced by migrants, but argue that embedded in their precarity, migrants consistently deploy individual and collective strategies to increase the protection of life, albeit with varying results.⁷

Our data also show that migrants were able to decline, along some corridors and in some instances, collaborations with criminal actors with no repercussion. Among our respondents, for example, no one reported having faced retaliation as a result of his or her unwillingness to work or travel with drug traffickers. Many, however, did complain about the treatment that they received during their migration at the hands of their smuggling facilitators.

This was however not an option that all could take, which further demonstrates the need to deconstruct the dynamics of clandestine journeys. Our respondents' testimonies, and those collected by other researchers along the U.S.-Mexico migratory trail, suggest that not all migrants' experiences can be discreetly categorized. Yet it is precisely this diverse range of experiences along different migratory corridors that may hold the clue to identify strategies of security from below that can reduce risks associated with clandestine migration.

Research has shown that it is not uncommon for men's and women's involvement in the migrant smuggling and drug trafficking markets to be rooted in their initial experiences as irregular migrants (see Achilli, this volume; Ayalew, this volume). While in some cases these experiences stay at the level of occasional supplemental income-generating opportunities (see Sanchez 2016, 80), there are also worrisome examples of how they may open paths to the professionalization of violence targeting migrants (see Slack and Whiteford 2011). Neither one, however, can or should be solely explained under criminological frameworks, and even less so under the often myopic lens of transnational crime, in which discourses often favor the criminalization of the practices of the poor—including migrants—while allowing for the establishment of enduring legacies of injustice. The analysis of the data solidifies the notion articulated by many others that the feared traffickers of migrants and drugs mobilized in state narratives of crime and crime control are most often ordinary citizens—including migrants themselves—whose choices and decision-making processes are far from driven by nefarious motives alone (see Zhang 2008; Chu 2010).

It is important to remember that it is in the context of their heightened vulnerability that people make decisions to enter into specific kinds of partnerships along their migration journeys, decisions that lead to varying levels of criminal involvement. Most often, these decisions are made with the goal of reducing the risks associated with irregular journeys and, in so doing, improving the possibility of crossing the border successfully. In the words of migrants, such partnerships are more a response to a logic of survival than to criminal motivations, even, and perhaps particularly, when violence is involved. These partnerships, however, do

not constitute evidence of market convergence, but instead point to collective and individual survival strategies deployed to reduce risk.

The testimonies discussed in this article are only a sample of experiences amid a wide range of interactions that emerge among those who transit and traffic on the border and, as such, should be interpreted with caution. They do suggest that the relationship between human smuggling and criminal/ized actors exists, but is often not necessarily structural or even criminal in nature. Instead, our analysis of the interactions—what Vogt refers to as “micro-level interpersonal dynamics” (2016, 368)—suggests that they are rooted in a complex system where reciprocity, care, and solidarity take place alongside the potential for violence.

Criminologically, the data amount to contacts among individuals who independently work and navigate the space of the border, and who most often do not claim or recognize a particular membership or association. In other words, they indicate that membership to specific groups is blurry if not altogether nonexistent. Collaboration among groups—of migrants, coyotes, or narcos—is fluid, adaptable, and organized in different ways, some better orchestrated than others. At the same time, the relationships that allow for human smuggling occur alongside drug trafficking. Our data indicate that all actors are aware that they share the same geographic landscape and that unwritten rules, often grounded in fear, give priority to drug trafficking groups along specific routes. The data also reveal that these implicit arrangements often generate disputes and disagreements among migrant smugglers and their clients, the latter often opting to find alternative means of crossing—a decision that may lead to interactions or collusions with members of other illicit groups, including drug traffickers.

In all our cases, it appears that human smugglers and drug traffickers are part of the growing groups of ordinary people who, around the world, have opted to enter illicit markets that pose scant membership restrictions amid the ever-decreasing prospects of late modernity. The stories of human traders and narco-traffickers on the loose galvanize support among the public for greater enforcement, but draconian immigration laws and the building of “big, beautiful, border walls” (Trump 2015) far from address or even shed light on the complexity of the experiences of those who seek their futures along clandestine paths. In sum, our data suggest that all actors on the migrant trail seek not only to avoid detection from law enforcement but also to survive.

Conclusion

The interactions between human smuggling facilitators and members of other criminal/ized groups along the U.S.-Mexico border (often referred to collectively as *La Mafia*) are common elements of a little-understood but thriving economic ecosystem and tend to vary greatly in nature. The relationships that emerge among people of the border (and specifically those who reside in communities along the drug trafficking and migrant smuggling routes) are often monolithically referred to as criminal, but our data suggest that this characterization is narrow and simplistic. We find that most interactions lack criminal intention. The nature

of the U.S.-Mexico border as a liminal, marginal/ized space makes it hard to establish a line where the licit economy ends and the illicit starts. Both are inextricably connected in a region with limited employment options where even “law-abiding” activities are often intertwined with the “illicit” enterprise of border crossings and drug trafficking.

The emphasis on the part of law enforcement, policy-makers, and scholars to define markets such as human smuggling and drug trafficking as controlled by or organized in networks has often obscured the variety of interactions among the people who share the migrant trail, by applying blanket terms or designations that simplify and narrowly define community-grounded practices and, by extension, the people who participate in them. The testimonies of those who cross the border extralegally point to a misunderstanding of human smuggling along the U.S.-Mexico border as being under the control of DTOs. Beyond the collection of land tax or *piso*, the “connection” between drug trafficking and human smuggling is often blurry. What is clear is that participants in both markets acknowledge their mutual existence, and have over time devised arrangements for coexistence. Interactions between drug trafficking and human smuggling groups are hardly the result of networks coming together. Instead, they reveal the growing number of people from the margins striving to survive.

Notes

1. Refer to the annual reports from Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission, WOLA, Amnesty International, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

2. While there are no official numbers on the people who are smuggled along the U.S.-Mexico border each year, some numbers have been used as proxies. It is, for example, estimated that about 200,000 people travel through Mexico each year in an attempt to reach the United States (IOM COLEF 2016). U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement reported 303,916 people had been apprehended along ports of entry along the southwest border (WOLA 2017).

3. To mind come the statement of then-Arizona governor Jane Hull that the finding of “headless bodies” in the desert—a claim denied by local law enforcement—pointed to the presence of Mexican DTOs and the unfortunate remarks of then-Sheriff Babeau, who attributed it to Mexican migrant smugglers.

4. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

5. *Coyote* is the colloquial term used in reference to smuggling facilitators on the U.S.-Mexico border. In this article, we opt for the terms *smuggling facilitators* or *smugglers* as they are more inclusive of the actors who participate in the market and who do not define their activities as those of a coyote, a term that may carry derogatory connotations.

6. Ajo Arizona is a community on the U.S. side of the border where organic farms abound. Elsa’s testimony is indicative of the experiences of migrants who having crossed the U.S. border, manage to avoid detection and gain employment in small, local farms.

7. See the excellent analyses of Slack and Whiteford (2011) and Izcara Palacios (2015) of poststructural violence, documenting the involvement of migrants in the victimization of other migrants.

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