You Can Cross Any Time You Want

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

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

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

Map 1. Boquillas crossing route used by Beto & collaborators, 1999-2000
Beto had been back in La Cancha for about two years when I met him. People who knew him told me they thought he might also have been involved in drug-dealing in Austin, but no one knew for sure. He had worked as a welder at a Pemex refinery near Cadereyta, Nuevo León for a while, but he had working there by the time I met him. Though he no longer traveled to the United States, he recruited customers for a group of coyotes based at the border in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, who paid him $100 for every migrant he brought them. Beto had an old Chevrolet sedan parked behind the store and some of the other young men that hung out there would go into the car with him from time to time. I wasn't sure if they were getting high together, if Beto was their local seller of marijuana, or both—or neither. No one discussed it and I didn’t want to press the issue. One of Beto’s friends told me, in an affectionate tone, that Beto was a *bandido* and very *mañoso* [crafty, tricky]. No one seemed to regard him as any kind of real criminal, though, and his relations with everyone coming in and out of the store appeared to be cordial and *tranquilo*. He was not an overtly fearsome or threatening character in any way, more of a handsome Johnny that a protective father might be worried about taking advantage of his teen-aged daughter. He was happy to talk with me about his experiences.

**TEEN-AGED COYOTES OUT FOR AN ADVENTURE**

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

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

**Spener:** What was included in that “package”?

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

**Spener:** So, they had to cover all the trip’s expenses, including yours.
Beto: Exactly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**CARPENTRY & COYOTEADAS IN AUSTIN**

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

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

Map 2. State of Coahuila

Beto noted that although Central Americans were much more lucrative to transport than Mexicans—they might pay as much as $7,000 to be transported to the United States—he and his collaborators had not had any experience transporting them. All of their customers had been Mexicans and most had been zacatecanos. There were a couple of reasons for not having Central American customers, he said. First, the Central Americans usually had their own coyotes de planta [in-house], who organized
everything from start to finish from their own countries. Second, he said, it was a lot more risky to move Central Americans than it was to move fellow Mexicans, since you could be arrested and imprisoned by the Mexican authorities as well as the U.S. authorities:

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

**Spener:** Really? Why?

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

**Spener:** So it’s riskier to transport Central Americans?

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

**Spener:** So, who takes the Central Americans?

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

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

**Beto:** Mexicans and Central Americans, both together.

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

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

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

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

**Spener:** And how do you know this?

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

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

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

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

**Beto:** Exactly. The one who wants to can do it. If he wants to get there, he gets there.
Spener: And the person who wants to start his own [coyotaje] business can do it, too?
Beto: Not just anyone. You have to know the routes you have to take.
Spener: How do you learn this kind of thing? Well, in your case, somebody taught you here in the Valley, right?
Beto: Right. Hooking up with somebody who knows the way, and then you know the routes and you can set up your business. You work out an agreement with two or three people over there [in Texas], with two or three people here [in Mexico], and then you rent cars, vans, Suburbans, whatever you can rent. And then you guide them across. That's all you need to get working.

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

Spener: Does the boss of one of these businesses get rich?
Beto: Everyone involved gets rich!
Spener: But here we are sitting in a little shack. You're certainly not rich! What happens with that money?
Beto: Well, what happens is that when they threw me in jail, I lost all that money.
Spener: And how much had you built up, if it's not indiscreet to ask?
Beto: Look, I had five cars and I had, like, $18,000 cash in hand.
Spener: Five cars, right, but those were for the business.
Beto: No! Those were just for fun! Good cars, too! Recent models. I had an '89, a '93, others from the 90s. Since you know you could wind up in jail, you don't want to have a bad time, you want to have a good time. So you spend about as much as you've got.
Spener: But your boss, then
Beto: Now he has money. They've never caught up with him. He came from here to take people across, too, but they never caught him like they caught me.
Spener: And he works in construction, too?
Beto: Right. He earns money from that, too.
Spener: And working [as a coyote] just on the week-end, you really can make a lot.
Beto: Right. You can make six or seven thousand dollars in a week-end! But then, when you wind up in jail, you're going to lose it all.

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

**Beto:** It was logical for immigration to accuse me as the coyote because I was driving. And they also scared the people, threatening them, saying that if they didn’t say who the coyote was they were all going to jail—that was a lie. But the people got scared and said I was the coyote. And then I was in jail for a month in Alpine before they sent me off to Pecos, Texas. And it was there where everyone testified and finally they said that I wasn’t the coyote. That they’d arranged things with somebody else.

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

**Beto:** My friend was. I was the driver.

**Spener:** What’s the difference?

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

**Spener:** And he’s your boss?

**Beto:** Exactly. He’s my boss.

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

**Spener:** Why have prices gone up so much?

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

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

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

**Spener:** But, in that case, are they charging more because they have to work harder to get people across, because they have to
You can cross any time you want, or what?

Beto: They charge more now because with the first arrest it's six months in prison. It used to be a month, a couple of weeks, or even just overnight and they'd let you go. That's why they're charging so much more now. Because of the risk of going to prison.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spener: So, you'd do it.

Beto: Definitely!

Spener: You want to go back to doing it.

Beto: Right.

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

Beto: Right, for five or ten years. Right! But the money kills the fear! [chuckles] I'd like to go back in a year or so. Maybe I'll give you a call over there in another year. 
After interviewing Beto, I realized that he was the nephew of Delia, the wife of Rigoberto, the man who had brought me to La Cancha to learn more about the experiences of migrants there. When I had interviewed Delia and Rigoberto in their home in the McAllen area before going to La Cancha, she had told me that she had a nephew who had worked as a coyote in Austin and had been arrested. She made very clear that she did not approve of him or his lifestyle. She had heard rumors that he had beaten and ripped off several women from La Cancha who were trying to get across the border. In subsequent interviews with other people in La Cancha I learned that she was mistaken about Beto having been involved in that incident. Here is what she had to tell me about her nephew before I knew I would subsequently meet him:

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

**WORKING AS A RECRUITER FOR OTHER COYOTES**

Although Beto thought it was inadvisable for him to work as a coyote in Texas for the moment, he had stayed in the business in a more marginal way, working as a recruiter in the La Cancha area for some coyotes based at the border in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Although he and his former partners in Austin generally had moved migrants through Boquillas, they had also gone through Piedras Negras-Eagle Pass on a few occasions as well, so he had some experience on that route. Ironically, though, he got connected to the coyotes in Piedras Negras through one of their members that he met while he was in prison:

I met him on the day I was getting out of prison, after serving my six months. He was getting out on the same day. He told me he
You can cross any time you want

worked out of Piedras and I told him I’d been working out by Big
Bend. We exchanged phone numbers and all that. And we’ve
been in touch ever since. That’s how the collaboration began.

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

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

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

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

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

The question of abuses committed by coyotes was fresh in my mind because the Instituto Nacional de Migración had been running public service announcements on Televisa warning migrants of the danger of hiring coyotes to cross the border. The night before one of my interviews with Beto I had seen these announcements on television in my hotel room and had also watched a news story about a group of migrants that had died from dehydration in the desert of California's Imperial Valley. I asked Beto, who had also seen the announcements, what he thought of them.

Beto: It's good that they're doing that because there are coyotes who behave badly and abandon people out in the desert. It happens, but not so much around here. Here in Nuevo León, for example, or in Coahuila or Tamaulipas. It's out there by El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juárez, and out there in California where all these things happen.
Spener: But that still leaves us with the question of whether there are only a few good coyotes and a lot of bad ones or vice versa.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They should always try to go with a group of people. Several, at least. If you’re traveling alone and you don’t know anyone else on the trip, you can get left behind more easily. But if you’re going with a bunch of people, and there’s only one coyote on the trail, he can’t leave them behind, since there are a lot of them. The more paper there are, the safer it is. Together you have some leverage.12

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

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

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

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

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

Beto. Andale [you’ve got it].

Spener: Someone who knows the way.

Beto: Exactly.

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

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

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

Beto: You don’t know if they’re bad until you’re living it yourself, until you’re walking and they don’t wait for you or if they can’t get you across. That’s when you know who acts right by people. And who doesn’t.
**Spener:** But how is it possible for the ones who don’t act right to stay in the business if everyone knows...

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

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

**Spener:** Isn’t there a lot of turnover in these groups? Really, the members of these groups that people are going to get to know are the guides, right? The ones who lead them through the brush. But how do you know you’re going to get the same guides?

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

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

Another question I asked Beto about had to do with coyotes arming themselves, whether for protection or to enforce the deals they made with migrants. He insisted that no one he had ever worked with as a coyote had been armed. He acted surprised at my question about whether he ever worried about his own safety since migrants usually outnumbered their coyotes significantly and there were many other groups of coyotes competing with his. The migrants he said, were “very peaceful people.” All they wanted, he said, was to get where they were going, reunite with their family members, and start working. “They’re not looking for any trouble,” he said. Moreover, migrants were typically pretty compliant with the things coyotes asked/ordered them to do. They seldom challenged their coyotes’ judgment or authority once the trip was underway since they were reluctant to do anything that might delay or jeopardize their arrival. He also had not had any experience with migrants refusing or not being able to pay once they had arrived in Houston or Austin. For this reason, neither he nor his collaborators had ever felt the need to be armed to ensure payment. He described the typical scenario of migrants waiting for their contacts to come through with the money for their passage as follows:

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

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

When I asked Beto what his customers thought of him, as opposed to what he thought of his customers, he said he wasn’t sure, but did know that some of them appreciated what he had done for them:
Spener: What do you suppose their attitude is towards you as a guide? What do they think of you? Do you have any idea?

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

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

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

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

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

Beto: A criminal, exactly! [laughs]

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

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

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

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

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

Beto: [emphatic] No, nobody.

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

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

1 Stories posted on this website complement research reported in the book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border*, written by David Spener and published in 2009 by Cornell University Press. References to Beto’s story appear *Clandestine Crossings* on pages 172-173, 187-191, and 198. Beto and the name of the town where he lived are pseudonyms. Research and writing for the book and this collection of stories were made possible by generous support from Trinity University and the John D. and Catharine T. MacArthur Foundation.


4 The town of Boquillas used to be a popular spot for U.S. tourists to visit by crossing the river by rowboat in the opposite direction. The town was memorialized in the song “Gringo Honeymoon,” composed by the popular country singer Robert Earl Keen. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, the Border Patrol closed down this extra-official crossing, which provoked the withering of Boquillas, whose residents had depended upon tourism as their main source of income.

5 U.S. law does not, in fact, assign higher penalties for transporting non-Mexicans than for transporting Mexicans. I think that Beto’s belief in this regard had more to do with the risk of prosecution within Mexico for transporting non-Mexicans through the country illegally.

6 Of course, this is not true for Guatemalans, though it would be true for both Salvadorans and Hondurans, the other two largest groups of Latin American immigrants that enter the United States by crossing its southern border with Mexico. I suspect he may have been thinking of the famous *corrido* by Los Tigres del Norte, “Tres Veces Mojado,” which relates the travails of a Salvadoran man who attempts to migrate to the United States.

7 For more information on the intensification of border enforcement during this period, see *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 1, “The Unfolding of Apartheid in South Texas.”
8 In another interview, Beto told me that some friends of his had recently made it to Austin without hiring a coyote at all or being apprehended by the Border Patrol on the way.
9 Dinero fácil was a common trope used by my interviewees to talk about coyotes’ role in the migration process. See Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 6, “Passing Judgment: Coyotes in the Discourse of Clandestine Border-Crossing.”
10 Today, more than half of criminal prosecutions in the U.S. federal courts are for immigration violations. See information provided by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse of Syracuse University at http://trac.syr.edu/tracreports/crim/223/.
11 I do not know if Beto ever returned to Texas to work as a coyote. He has not called me since our last interview in 2002.
12 For more discussion about migrants’ strategies for avoiding abuses by their coyotes, see Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power.”
13 Migrants I interviewed had similar reactions to these public service announcements. See Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country.” See also the story on this website titled “It Was a Lot of Money But It Was Worth It.”