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

Paco [a pseudonym] was a coyote I interviewed in Houston, Texas in September 2002. I had been referred to Paco by acquaintances I had made in Brownsville who had told me that he had been a coyote for a long time and could tell me a lot of things I wanted to know about operation and evolution of the coyotaje business in recent years in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The acquaintances gave me Paco’s cell phone number and told him I might call him. He did not answer when I called, so I left a message. He called me back within the hour. I made arrangements to meet him at a gas station the next day in Houston and then drove to his apartment, following his pick up truck in my own car. It was a week-day morning and when we got back to his apartment, his wife needed to leave for work, leaving Paco to care for their three preschool children. My tapes of the interview feature all the whoops, shouts, crying, laughing, TV playing in the background, and admonitions familiar to the parents of young children. Needless to say, these were not the conditions I expected to find a professional coyote living and working in.

LIFE BEFORE BECOMING A COYOTE

Paco was born in Brownsville, Texas in 1968, to Mexican parents who resided across the river in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. He lived the first ten years of his life in Matamoros before moving to Los Angeles with his family.
when he was eleven years old. He attended junior high school and high school in L.A. and when he left school he went to work in his family's business running a small cutting room in that metropolis's dynamic apparel industry. In the mid 1990s there was a downturn in the industry as competition from Mexico heightened with the advent of NAFTA and the family business went bankrupt. Now in his late twenties, with married with two young children, Paco moved to Houston, Texas at the invitation of a cousin, who said he could find him a job working construction. When that didn't materialize, Paco took his family back to Brownsville where rents were cheaper and he still knew a lot of people. Although the cost of living was much lower in Brownsville than in Houston, it's also much harder to find a decent job. Unemployment there is typically several percentage points higher than elsewhere in the United States, even during times of economic expansion. Several months after arriving, Paco was still without work and had a family to support. Around that time, he was invited by a childhood friend from Matamoros, named Juan (also not his real name), to help out with his coyotaje business. Paco could be especially useful in the business because, although he was Mexican through and through, he was a U.S. citizen by birth and could move back and forth across the border without restriction. The coyote tried to recruit Paco's brother-in-law as well, but he was afraid to get involved in this illegal activity. It was 1995.

GETTING STARTED

What Paco's Matamoros friend wanted him to do was safe and easy. The friend did not have papers to enter the United States legally, but Paco did. He asked Paco to drive a car with Texas plates across the bridge from Matamoros into Brownsville. He was then to drive up highway U.S. 77 through Harlingen, Raymondville, and the South Texas ranch country, past the Border Patrol checkpoint at Sarita, to the small town of Riviera, Texas, a few miles south of Kingsville. He would leave the car on the side of the highway early in the evening. Later in the evening, the friend would lead a small group of migrants through the brush around the Sarita checkpoint and pick up the car and drive it on to Houston. Once a group was past the Sarita checkpoint, they were pretty much home free to Houston, since there were no more immigration checkpoints to go through and there were far fewer Border Patrol vehicles on the highway north of Kingsville. The first few times he did this, the friend paid Paco $300. After Paco gained the friend's confidence, he was paid $500 per trip. The money was easy and paid Paco's rent at a time when he still had been unable to find work in Brownsville. Then the friend offered to make Paco his partner.
To enter the coyotaje enterprise as a full partner, Paco needed to come up with funds to invest in the business. He was able to do this by saving money from what he was being paid for driving as well as by selling an old car he had. The “investment” he needed to make did not involve housing, phones, cars, or other types of equipment. Rather, it involved “buying” groups of migrants from enganchadores [recruiters, literally “hookers”] who recruited aspirantes [aspiring migrants] at the Matamoros bus station. In those days (1995-1996), enganchadores were typically paid $20 per migrant that they brought to the coyotes, who would then cross them into the United States. When an enganchador would bring five migrants to Paco’s partner in Matamoros, the partner would pay the enganchador $100. Then Paco and his partner would pay a patero along the river another $30-$50 per person to cross the migrants into Brownsville. Because they did not charge the migrants a down payment at the outset of the trip, this meant a group of five migrants implied up to a $200 investment up front by Paco and his partner. In addition to that, they rented a house in Brownsville to house the migrants for a day or two at a time before making the trip past the immigration checkpoints and north to Houston. While at the house, they would call migrants’ relatives in Houston to make sure that each migrant had someone who was going to pay their $600 fee to be taken there.

Getting migrants through the ranch country of South Texas past the immigration checkpoints on the highways leading north towards Houston was the biggest challenge facing Paco and his partner. The routes they used varied depending upon the activities of the Border Patrol in the sector. One of their preferred strategies was to leave Brownsville at 5:00 AM and drive two and a half hours north and west on U.S. 83 to Zapata, Texas, at the north end of Falcon Reservoir, still on the border (see map). There they would turn north on Texas Highway 16. By 8:00 AM, they would drop off the group of migrants with a guide, who would lead them through the brush around the Border Patrol checkpoint near Hebbronville, Texas. It was important to get the migrants into the brush and start walking before 8:00 AM because from that hour forward Border Patrol agents would be circulating in the area. The migrants and guide would carry gallon jugs of water and food like crackers and canned tuna fish. Each person was required to carry his own food. Although the group would actually walk no more than a total of ten hours or so, they would hide in the brush much of the time during the daylight hours, so that if they began their trek at 7:00 AM they often would not reach their destination on the highway beyond the checkpoint until nightfall the next day. There a car would be waiting for
them and they would drive gravel back roads through the ranch country towards Robstown on U.S. 77 just outside of Corpus Christi. Once they reached Robstown, they were unlikely to be stopped by the Border Patrol or the Texas highway patrol and would continue untroubled on to Houston. They did, however, have a strategy for avoiding getting pulled over with a carful of migrants

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

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

SPENER: So you would try to distract them.

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

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

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

Spener: So, you weren't a gang, then.

Paco: No.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**GOING INTO BUSINESS FOR HIMSELF**

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

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

**SPENER:** You felt ...

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

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

Operation Rio Grande didn’t affect us. ... It didn’t affect us because we’d met a man who crossed people for us by way of the beach. Through Boca Chica, what they call “La bocana.” ... I never did find out how he did it. All we’d do is deliver the people to him in Matamoros and he would come and deliver them to us at our house in Brownsville. We worked like that for a couple of years. And we never had any problems with him. It was real expensive, though. We paid as much as $250 per person. But if you work it out, it was better for me in the long run. Because [before] I was paying about $120 just to have someone take them across the river for me. But then I had to pay someone else to take them to the river in Matamoros and to pick them up and bring them to me once they were across. So it was already coming out at about $200. And with this person, I just told him that [the migrants] would be in such and such a hotel or in such and such a house. He’d go get them and the next day I’d have them in Brownsville. And I would just ask the people, “Hey, how did you get across?” And they would say, “They took us across at La Boca, they picked us up in a car, they dropped us off before the checkpoint, we walked around the checkpoint and into the port, and he picked us up.”

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

Houston is not only a major destination for Mexican and Central American immigrants to the United States. It is also a major migration crossroads, as thousands of migrants coming from Mexico make connections there to continue on to other points in the eastern half of the United States, especially Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas, states that grew to prominence as destinations for new labor migrants during the 1990s. The city is home to dozens of above-ground transportation companies catering to immigrants (e.g., Los Primos de Atlanta, a bus company specializing in connections to the Southeastern states) as well as an unknown number of underground transportation services providers known colloquially as raiteros.11 Paco did not deal directly with the raiteros himself. Rather, one of his associates—the guide and driver—knew a half-dozen raiteros he could call to pick migrants up once they were in Houston. Just as the enganchadores of the Matamoros bus station “sold” migrants to Paco and his associates, so did Paco’s driver “sell” migrants to the raiteros for about $50 each. Of course, the migrants were not literally being bought and sold. Rather, the $50 received by Paco’s driver constituted something more akin to a referral fee paid to him by one of the many raiteros competing to transport migrants out of Houston to other destinations around the country. In principle, Paco could have collected this money himself, but he allowed his driver to “earn” this occasional extra money as something of a “bonus.”

TREKKING THROUGH THE BRUSH

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

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

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

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

In spite of the introduction by the Border Patrol in the late 1990s of a biometric database known as IDENT, into which photographs and fingerprints of all migrants that they apprehended were entered, guides known as caminadores were seldom prosecuted as coyotes. The reason for this, Paco explained, was that few groups were actually apprehended in the brush away from the river:
PACO: In the five years I worked on my own, I only had one caminador. No one else.

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

PACO: No, only at the river.

SPENER: I don’t understand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paco: The best ones at making the crossing are the rancheros, the guys from the rancho, because they’re good for walking. They’re real strong, you don’t have any trouble with them. Sometimes they even do it wearing boots, cowboy boots. Or they’ll hike through the monte wearing huaraches [rustic leather sandals] the michoacanos [people from the state of Michoacán]. And they don’t complain about anything.
Spener: They're tough men.
Paco: But not the Central American. They're no good at walking! They whine about everything and there are a lot of hassles. Sometimes you have to lie to the Central American. "You know what, how much are we going to walk? Only four or five hours." When in reality you're going to walk nine. But once they're there, they have to walk those nine hours! Those little white lies [mentiras piadosas], like they say.

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

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

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

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

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

RELATIONS WITH CLIENTS

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

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

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

Spener: So it was better not to take them.

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

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

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

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

Paco: I really think that God helped us. Because we always had a policy that no one taught us or anything, but any time we’d get into a dispute with anyone, what we’d do is let them go. Just like that. We’d lose the money. Why? Because of the experiences of other coyotes. If you clamp down on them it can bring you problems with the police or even with the migrant’s family members.

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

On one occasion we had to let three brothers go. They were from Puebla. I remember them well because one of them was gay and he called me about six months ago, at my sister’s house, since I change cell phones all the time. When he got here, his uncle was in Miami and I called him personally and he said, right, there’s not problem. That was in 2000, when we were charging $1,000.
It was $3,000 for the three of them. And he said, no problem, I’ll wire you the money when you get them to Houston. When we got here, the man didn’t come through with the money. So, one of the boys I worked with was a big talker and he tried to scare the guys. He said, you know what? You are going back [to Mexico]. Then the gay brother began to cry and he phoned me and said, give us a chance, and all that, they were going to pay us. And first of all, you feel bad because, in this case we were bringing around ten people, so you’re losing like 30 percent. That hurts! So I decided, since I was working on my own by then, okay, I was going to let them go. And, in fact, they did eventually pay me. I don’t think that will happen to anyone ever again: That he let someone go and they come back to pay him.

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

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

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

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

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

**Spener:** So, there are reasons for behaving well.

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

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

**OTHER COYOTES**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spener: They stop being a coyote and become a drug dealer.
Paco: Most of them.

Spener: So, how do they move up?
Paco: Well, they get the money together.

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

Spener: And are there any coyotes who take advantage of
migrants by crossing drugs with them?
Paco: In my experiences, I’ve never heard of it. I’ve heard on
television and all that, but not in my experiences.

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

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

SPENER: Did any worker of yours ever get prosecuted?
PACO: Only one. But they didn’t catch him with me. They
cought him bringing marijuana across. But that was a different
dance [fue otro baile]. He worked for me, but what happened was
that I would pay him, right, and he would disappear in
Matamoros for up to a month. Or he’d get his money and he’d go
to visit his wife’s family in Florida. I guess he had just as hard a
time holding onto money as I did. So there were times when he
didn’t have any money and I wouldn’t have any work for him, and
he’d have to go out and find something. And on that occasion
they caught him and gave him five years for bringing marijuana
across.
Thus, to the extent that members of an “organization” like his were really independent contractors, it was possible for given individuals to be engaged in both drug and coyotaje even though the businesses were set up separately and headed by different leaders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**SPENER**: So they shouldn't blame the coyote.

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

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

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

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

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

**Paco**: No! There are plenty [of migrants] to go around and I think that if there were fights it would be useless because one would finger the other [to the authorities], and so no, really there aren’t. Everything normal and each one minds his own business. Well, maybe there is some jealousy, that you’ve gotten more
There has been a great deal of reporting in the press that the coyotaje business has been taken over by large-scale syndicates that had effectively driven small-scale, "mom & pop" operators like Paco out of business. Paco did not believe this and insisted that nobody had muscled him out of the business or forced him to work for/with them if he wanted to continue to work as a coyote. According to Paco, no single group or small set of groups monopolized the transportation of migrants across the border. At the same time, he had had problems dealing with corrupt authorities in Matamoros. The men who recruited migrants at the bus station in Matamoros had to pay off police authorities—through the local mafia—to continue to operate there. These men, in turn, let the Matamoros mafia know to whom they were bringing groups of migrants to be crossed into the United States.

Paco was fingered in this way about two years after he had gone into business for himself and was stopped by the policía federal in Matamoros with a load of migrants in two vehicles. The police seized his vehicles and he was only able to recover them when he agreed to pay a monthly "cuota" of $1,000. He paid this fee through an intermediary to a local mafioso and after that never had a problem. He was given a "code" to give to any government authority that stopped him with migrants —whether it was the policía judicial, gobernación, or migración and he would be left alone. Later the cuota was raised to $2,000 and finally to $3,000 around the time he quit the business in early 2002. He did not like paying it, but said he had no choice but to pay it if he wanted to stay and business and stay out of jail:

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

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

**PACO:** Not after that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Paco**: Not really, but …

**Spener**: But a lot of people work at that …

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

**Spener**: But, there’s no gang that says, “Look, you cross with us or you don’t cross”?

**Paco**: No.

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

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

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

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

Spener: The same group?

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

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

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

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

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

**Paco:** Exactly.

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

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

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

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

**HE SHOULD BE A RICH MAN TODAY**

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

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

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

**Paco:** The deal is that I always spent everything I had. I spent a lot of money. Sometimes I even spent more than I had. It wasn’t because I was a drug addict or anything like that. I’ve never done
drugs, I have a cigarette every once in a while, and barely drink, either! But if you're talking about clothes, going to Las Vegas, or to a casino in Louisiana, that's why I don't have what I really ought to have today. ... Really there's no explanation. I ought to have practically a small fortune.

Spener: Yeah, that's $200,000 a year for six years.
Paco: Yeah, it’s a lot of money. And really, I do have two or three cars, but it really doesn’t reflect anything.

Spener: Do you own your own house?
Paco: No. Well, yes, in Mexico, but not here.

Spener: In Matamoros?
Paco: In Matamoros.

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

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

GETTING OUT OF THE BUSINESS

Paco left the business of coyotaje a little more than six months before the time of my interview with him in September 2002. There were several reasons for his decision to quit. One was a new business opportunity in Matamoros: He was going to set up a small maquiladora that would sew women’s bathing suits from pieces sent to him from a relative in Los Angeles, who would also put up much of the money for getting started. Second, the authorities he had to pay off in Matamoros had raised their cuota to $3,000 a month, a sum that Paco found burdensome.
SPENER: So, until the moment you got out of the business, you had to pay them off.

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

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

Spener: What has changed in recent years?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Spener:** Teach you what?

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

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

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

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

**Paco:** Well, really nothing, since I know people that didn't have any money and put together a trip getting the money from the [migrants]. They get a group of people together and tell them to send for money and right there they buy cars and all that. So I don't think this is an obstacle. The biggest obstacle, I think, is how bad you want it. Let go of your fear, since I was scared at first.

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

**SPENER:** How do you recruit these people?

**PACO:** They're all from Matamoros.

**SPENER:** And are they friends or family members?

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

THE FUTURE OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

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

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

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

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

SPENER: So people don’t give up.

PACO: No, clearly not. And the proof is that via San Antonio, they walk three or four nights. You know what I mean? That is never going to stop. I think that the law is the only thing than can
Relatedly, Paco also had some advice for undocumented migrants arriving at the border in Matamoros in the first years of the new century:

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

PACO'S MESSAGE TO GRINGO READERS

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

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

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

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

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 Paco’s story appear Clandestine Crossings on pages 148, 157-158, 172, 185, 224, and 227. 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.

2 In Mexican Spanish, the set of services provided by coyotes are known as coyotaje, pronounced koh-yoh-tah-hey. See Clandestine Crossings, “Terminology Used in This Book” and Chapter 3, “Coyotaje as a Cultural Practice Applied to Migration.”

3 He also had two older school-aged children from a previous marriage, who lived with their mother.

4 According to Paco, one gallon of water was not enough during the hot months of the year, but there were windmills and spigots available on ranches where they could replenish their supply.

5 DPS is the acronym for the Texas Department of Public Safety, i.e., the highway patrol

6 Literally, “the crosser,” i.e., the person who takes someone else across the river.

7 Literally, “the hopper,” i.e., the person who dedicates himself to the brinco or “hop” across the river.

9 Prior to 2003, the Rio Grande Valley Sector of the U.S. Border Patrol was known as the McAllen Sector.

10 As part of Operation Rio Grande, the Border Patrol put up a checkpoint on Texas Highway 4, which leads from the beach at Boca Chica back into Brownsville. The "port" referred to here is the Port of Brownsville, located off that same highway.

11 Literally a “ride-giver,” a latinization of the English word “ride.”

12 See Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country,” for a detailed description of conditions faced by migrants as they trekked through South Texas.

13 Not literally “ranchers” in the sense given the term in the western U.S., but rather Mexican men from rural areas where subsistence agriculture and grazing, whether of goats or cattle, are the primary economic activities.

14 For further discussion of the issue of coyotes abandoning migrants on the trail, see Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power,” and Chapter 6, “Coyotes in the Discourse of Clandestine Border-Crossing.”

15 As to how well smugglers take care of migrants on the trail, a Border Patrol agent I interviewed in March 2004 commented that agents never find migrants abandoned by smugglers in the brush who have received proper first aid for whatever ailments have prevented them from keeping up with their group.

16 This is not a big percentage discount, however, since Paco had been charging $1,000 or more per person since the late 1990s: a $250 discount on a $5,000 fee.

17 See below on the difficulties he faced in dealing with the Matamoros authorities.

18 Paco’s belief about the separation between the drug smuggling and coyotaje on this section of the border was shared by Border Patrol agents, U.S. federal court officials, and other coyotes I interviewed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For further discussion of this point, see Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 4, “Types of Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period.”

19 A year and a half after this interview I had the opportunity to ask a federal judge that tried many smuggling cases who was getting rich off smuggling business. His observation was that there were some people like Paco making a lot of money but that easy money was easy to spend. In other words, a smuggler from a working class background who suddenly had money was not likely to spend and invest it wisely. In most of the cases he tried, few assets of smugglers’ were seized besides the vehicles they owned.
These are all small towns in South Texas along the U.S. 77 corridor between Harlingen and Kingsville.