



Edu Ponces, Ruido Foto

All Roads Lead North: A reading of news on migration through the figure of the coyote

Amparo Marroquín Parducci | Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, El Salvador

Abstract:

This essay is a reflection on the role of the coyote as the protagonist of Salvadorean migration to the United States and as a fundamental mediator – liminal and diffuse – between migrants and organized crime. Basing herself on a series of interviews she conducted with coyotes as part of a broader research project, Marroquín recounts different facets of the work of this central figure in the sinuous and changing roads of northward migration and its intersections with the narco-machine. Salvadorian emigration to the United States has become a mass phenomenon, resulting in one out of every four Salvadorians living outside the country. Marroquín explores the role of the coyote in the migrants' difficult journey through Mexico and across the US border (a journey almost invariably led by a coyote) – a route mined with dangers and obstacles that renders the migrants the main victims of the abuses perpetrated by organized crime, common criminal groups and law enforcement agencies.

Prelude in Fugue¹

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No one considers it a secret. Northward migration is a life project for many Salvadorians: young people, girls, the elderly, men and women, sons, mothers, neighbors, friends, students, professionals, peasants, the unemployed. In the northern triangle – a region now statistically classified as the most violent in the world – people are always trying to get out. They get out a lot. As the poet Kijadurías wrote, “once again nailing shut and prying open,” those crates contain the last spoils of the country they once had. And just like that, they carry on.

Migrations in El Salvador are not a recent reality: people are always coming in and going out, moving from one place to another, from the countryside to the city first and then from country to country. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Salvadorian elite relocated to Europe and the United States; from there they constructed a cosmopolitan and enlightened imaginary as the ideal. Migration continued through the ensuing hundred years, gradually encompassing sectors of the middle class and, finally, during the war years in the 1970s and 80s, becoming a mass phenomenon. El Salvador is the smallest country in the region, and displacement –sometimes forced and sometimes voluntary– has resulted in one out of every four Salvadorians living outside of the country.



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Despite its evident quantitative significance, migration was seldom studied. It was thought of as a transitory phenomenon linked to the war, which would soon be over. But after the peace process, researchers were clearly surprised: with the end of the armed struggles, emigration multiplied and has gradually transformed El Salvador into what could be called a fugitive nation, in the double sense of the word. In musical terms, experts consider the fugue the highest form of counterpoint. Its name comes from the Latin *huida* and indicates how voices and melodies respond to each other, overlap, and flee from each other.

The fugue also denotes its literal sense: in El Salvador, traditional limitations have also fled as it has been shattered by the double processes of migration and the transnational violence of narco-trafficking and gangs. Young people are the actors and protagonists of these events. Seven out of ten want to leave. Many others know no territory other than their

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neighborhood, no other solidarity than that which they experience in the clique, in that *other* transnational world that is the gang. There are many Salvadorians who no longer live *on this side*, within these borders. They are part of the country from *over there*—Milan, Calgary, Washington, Melbourne, Barcelona, and Oslo. The *corridos* of the Tigres del Norte tell us that we are “wetbacks three times over” and sing about how terrible it is to be a Central American condemned to deny our country and learn to “speak Mexican” so that the *migra* [the Border Patrol] does not deport us too far, leaving us closer to the border.

Let me say, then, that mine is a fugitive country, which reinvents itself at every border in a piecemeal way. In the silence of dawn, this country that fits nowhere crosses rivers, smuggling sorrows and dreams in a backpack.

In this flight there is a central character. In many cases, he has been the difference between life and death, success and failure. He is an obscure character loosely portrayed in the media: the forger of roads, the speaker of riddles, the knower of the passwords and secret handshakes that open borders and close the doors to extortion and kidnapping. Alternately respected, feared, invoked and conjured: he is the *coyote*.

The coyote, the *pollero*, the guide, the *patero*, the traveler, as he is called in different places, has a thousand names and a thousand different modes of operating. There are men and women coyotes. Popular lore has it that women coyotes are better, safer, and more effective in attaining their objective. The coyotes operate in very different ways. Some of them fly people by plane to the southern border of the United States; others transport people in a “luxury truck” and check them into good hotels; still others board migrants on top of a train, knowing all the dangers entailed by fatigue or the bands of assailants and criminal cartels that can cross their path. One of the more recent modalities is that of cyber-coyotes, who never meet the migrants face-to-face or lead them on their path, but rather guide them using text messages with instructions to move or linger, to search for a specific site or to wait for a contact-person.

Through the coyote, one becomes familiar with many aspects of migration and with the ways in which undocumented migration has crossed paths with other facets of the para-legality experienced in both Mexico and Central America. This essay is a reflection on the role of the coyote as the protagonist of Salvadorian migration to the United States and as a fundamental mediator – liminal and diffuse— between migrants and organized crime. In the academy, except for some texts like those of David Spener (2004 and 2009) or Rodolfo Casillas (2011), reflections on the figure of the coyote have generally been superficial. I am basing this essay on interviews with coyotes I conducted as part of a broader project directed by Rodolfo Casillas, as well as on the testimonies of migrants and the more careful journalistic coverage of this complex issue.

1. Stories Unfolding in History

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The border was not always as it is today. It was easier before. Inés, a young economist, remembers the story of her grandmother. “She went to the United States before the war, in a year when coffee didn’t sell, and because my grandmother’s farm left her nothing, she decided to go.” Back then, getting a US visa was not complicated. But Inés’s grandmother traveled “wet,” that is, without the required papers. Upon arriving in the north of Mexico, she discussed ways of crossing to “the other side” with several people. A young man offered a motorcycle ride. “Just one condition grandma, hold on tight, because if you fall, the migra will come and I’m not going to stop...” And they crossed like that.



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But many things have happened since then. Migration has increased exponentially. Likewise with the coyotes, who have become important local figures. The migration business started growing and public space was transformed, beginning with architecture. It was not only the houses of the migrants that stood out in the local urban infrastructure, but those of the coyotes as well. And with the growth of migration, US immigration policy shifted. Since 1998, legal debates on the criminalization of migration have become more and more prominent. The attack on the twin towers on September 11, 2001, transformed the public discussion about security in the region. The road north, however, remained the same, although there were different ways to travel it. The poor – with restricted social networks and limited resources – traveled alone, by land, to the train that would lead them there. Those with more resources contacted a reliable coyote.

The year 2005 brought a decisive change to the road used day-in and day-out by the migrants. In October of that year, hurricane Stan destroyed the cargo railways that the migrants used in Tapachula. From then on, the journey began with a 250-kilometer trek on foot to Arriaga. That same year, in December, the US House of Representatives approved bill HR 4437, the “Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act,” known as the Sensenbrenner Bill after its sponsor in Congress.

Undocumented immigration became even more clandestine. As the Mexican priest Alejandro

Solalinde has repeated tirelessly in countless interviews, organized crime cartels and local criminal groups discovered an easy and secure source of business in those migrants looking to pass unnoticed in the jungle and on the route known as *La arrocera*.

2. On the Installation of the Narco-Machine and Other Variables

On August 25, 2010, night fell on a good part of Latin America with an unnerving news-story: seventy-two migrants had been massacred in a ranch in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. The media shined a spotlight on this event, but it was not without precedent. In his book, *Los migrantes que no importan (The Migrants Who Don't Matter, 2010)*,

Salvadorian journalist Óscar Martínez compiled a series of *crónicas* documenting the constant disappearances and abuses perpetrated by the Border Patrol [*la migra*], common criminal groups and organized crime against migrants, who have long been their main victims.



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For coyotes, the dangers have changed in the last years. Different actors assimilate their lived experiences in different ways; how those experiences are remembered and narrated, what is said and what is silenced, amounts to the construction of the social significance of migration and the coyotes. “Some coyotes are not very good, and there are also those called ‘travelers,’ who only take their relatives, friends, and acquaintances,” observed a 23-year old man, who told me that he had to pay his debt to the traveler who had taken his brother north that week. “There are good coyotes and bad coyotes. The bad ones end up dead. The one who did that thing in Tamaulipas, woke up snuffed before making it back to El Salvador,” a migrant remarked on a telephone-call from Houston.

Undercutting the media’s representation of the coyote as a drug-dealer or criminal, the Salvadorian men and women who “use” the services of the coyote come to conclusions similar to those that Spener (2008) formulated in his research. The coyotes cannot be categorically defined as good or evil, they resort to different ways of working: many remain outside the world of organized crime although they do have to negotiate with it to cross the border; many have

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friendly relations of cooperation with their clients – not just relations of abuse and anonymity – and fulfill their services with a certain satisfaction. The migrants, moreover, do not necessarily blame coyotes for the difficulties they encounter on in their journey, in spite of the image of the coyote constructed by the media and by state functionaries, which would suggest otherwise.

In the interviews conducted with people who are or have been coyotes, one sees hints of the ways in which they construct their own subjectivity. Coyotes say that their work is hard but that it earns them good money, they generally do not do it out of the goodness of their hearts. The coyotes are out to make a profit, although they point out that what distinguishes a good coyote from a bad one is their capacity to get their clients across, to satisfy their needs, not to lead them through difficult roads or to let ambition get the best of them:

- Because the good coyote would rather bribe the different authorities that let him cross –that let me cross– rather than running the risk of having the migrants swim in the ocean or boarding them on the famous “diver train.”

- And who is the diver, you?

- [He laughs] When they are locked up in the cargo holds, because the risks are too high. Because there is just no chance that someone will find them if a given vehicle breaks down or in the case that the train has an accident or something, there is no hope. In the train... well the dangers are many, because the train never stops and if a person is tired from the trip and starts dozing off, he falls. The journeys last up to 12 hours without stopping– sometimes even 24– so the people up there are exhausted, and the risk is just too high, really, just too high. That’s what differentiates the good from the bad coyotes. (Interview with a coyote, March 2, 2011)

Coyotes must take care to present themselves in a particular way. Their public image and their ostentation are key to earning their clients’ trust: they have to dress well and show that they have money. At the same time, as in every negotiated contract and as with every businessman, the coyotes act following the same kind of logic as many night club bouncers, a set of rules they impose on the first meeting – some say they won’t take people with tattoos or people who are ill because they endanger the journey. One pact is central: if the *migra* catches them, the migrants turn themselves in but never reveal who the coyote is. If everything goes according to plan, they will be deported and the coyote will lead a second attempt, or a third – however many are necessary depending on the agreed-upon fee.

They use their intuition. The trade of the coyote is learned on the road. The codes, the honor, the tricks, the people to know are all there. The road tests the courage of those who want to slip through the porous borders of this shady business.

On my first trip, well, I had certain problems, and I had to endure certain situations [he laughs]. The one who was taking me, the coyote, practically turned back at the decisive hour and I had to step up to the plate. When I arrived there, he asked me if I

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wanted to work with him. He asked if I wanted to help him in his work, and we started working together. It's easy to say, "hey, I can handle this kind of thing," but when the time comes, you don't have what it takes. Many can't handle it. People have asked me to teach them, and I was almost jailed for trying to teach a cousin because he got cold feet, as they say, when the time came to face the law [he laughs again]. He couldn't bear the pressure when the time came to face the authorities. That's why you can't teach this kind of thing just like that. It has to be someone you trust, or someone you see has potential, someone you think has what it takes. And if I'm saying it, it's because I've seen it, and as I was telling you, there are men who go around on their horses, with their mustaches, with a gun in their belt and they end up begging for help when troubles come their way because they can't do it on their own. And the ones who look all quiet and unassuming over here ... on the road they really work well, they have the right stuff... they know how to work. (Interview with a coyote, March 1, 2011)

As with other skills of the road, learning to deal with organized crime groups is an indispensable lesson: understanding their codes, straddling the border of what Rossana Reguillo (2008) calls para-legality.

If you believe in God, it's because you need him [he laughs]... Why? Because many of the narco-traffickers, not the migrants, the narcos, never allow the undocumented to use the roads they use to smuggle drugs. There are different routes, but if the guide gets lost for any reason, the people in his group may be risking their lives. Why? Because the narcos don't allow the undocumented to go through their roads, because they leave too many footprints behind and second...mmmm... the patrol-planes can more easily detect them, mark the route as one used by migrants, and deploy tighter surveillance, preventing the narcos from doing their drop-offs. That is very important in these routes. That's why luck and God's blessing make such a difference in getting across safe and sound. But if the narco-traffickers find them, it's almost certain that they will neither arrive in the US nor return to their country, because the narcos "take care of them." The "deal" is that you have to pay to cross; there is a fee you have to pay to cross through Mexico. They outline the routes for you and provide you the safe-passes themselves. Then, even if you encounter a narco-trafficker, you won't face any danger. They give you a phone number, a password, a... a safe-pass, as they call it, a code word as they call it. But it's not always the same, because sometimes they tell you, "hey, call the boss, this is his number." They give you the number, but they're changing it constantly, so that even if you think you're clever you won't get away with it. Because there are people who try to cross several times with the same password, they try a third time and that's when there is trouble. (Interview with a coyote, March 1, 2011)

Contrary to common claims, the coyotes say these types of dangers are not new; they have existed for a while. Many even contend that the Mexican situation has actually facilitated the crossing:

Mexico is now an easy crossing: And... there are other circumstances that come up on the way, sometimes bands of assailants come out, sometimes they don't. Then there are the famous Zetas, who are really a group... there are many who portray them as evil. But I can't classify them either as good or evil. They do what they are paid to do; it's their own business. They give... they provide security services to the different cartels. That's actually their work, although they're categorized as the Zetas, period. But you have to report even to them. (Interview with a coyote March 2, 2011)

In fact, some coyotes will insist that it is the authorities that represent the greatest danger because they don't keep their word; they charge a fee and then they turn people in. They say "yes," but they do not mean it. That's where the danger comes from, not from the control exercised by organized crime.

3. What We Are Left With

The roads of migration are sinuous and changing. The coyotes are still there. They carry stories, aesthetics, and people from here to there – like the coyote who brought back the latest *corridos* for a DJ friend to broadcast on the radio. Or Roxana, a coyote from Tonacatepeque, who started setting aside money from the day she started working, planning for the day when she would be caught. And now, from jail, she tells her stories and plans her retirement, while many keep asking her to get them across the border; or Miguel, the retired coyote, who after twelve years of riding the train told his story to the journalist Óscar Martínez (2008).

While borders between countries are reinforced, the invisible ones—those marking the line between honest work and clandestine labor—are increasingly blurry. How can one grapple with this and other violent phenomena, while transcending the dualist logic that conceives this narrative either through the framework of discipline or that of spectacle? How can one better approach and understand the phenomenon of migration, the limits and contours of those borders, and their connection with discussions about violence, without falling into the discourses that run the gamut from national security to the evil violence of the poor savages? The coyote is still there, while I write this, waiting with a group of migrants for a call coming from somewhere in the US, where a voice known by everyone and no one says: "you can cross now."

In the story of the migratory transit, there are heroes and bandits, fantastic characters that fail in the pursuit of the object of their desire, vials of magic potions as simple as water, extraordinary witches known by some as the *patronas* [the bosses], all of whom weave new networks of solidarity that cannot be explained purely in terms of economic rationality. Who is the coyote *in* this story? Is it the adversary who does not let the migrant arrive at his destination and who, with a final sneering laugh, abandons him to death in a boiling trailer in the middle of the desert, sealed from the outside so that not even the sand can hear him screaming? Is he the migrant's best aide? Is he his mentor, his guardian, his

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protector? Migration, unfolding autonomously beyond the regulation of the state will generate this character from its many different crossroads. What has the coyote come to symbolize? Can we speak of a national hero? For the coyote, all roads lead north and on those roads he or she remains, still.

Translated by Miguel Winograd

Amparo Marroquín Carducci is professor and researcher in the Department of Communication and Culture at the Universidad Centroamericana in El Salvador. She obtained her Master's in Communications at the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Occidente in Guadalajara, México.

Notes

¹ This reflection began with an email from Rossana Reguillo, in which she invited me to think about the narco-machine. She asked me to reflect on the intersection of migration and narco-trafficking in Central America. The first images, arising almost automatically, were those of the *Zetas*, Tamaulipas, San Fernando, the mass graves, the disappeared, the pain of the families. But I then thought about the type of person that I've been searching for in the last months without much success: the individual who lives half his life in the community that hires him, and the other half in a dark, clandestine para-legality. To say it with words borrowed from Rossana, the coyote lives "in the clandestine centrality of daily life," and from there he dislocates. This led to the question: on which side will I position myself? This individual who deals with the narco-machine, who sometimes assimilates himself to it, and borders it at other times, seemed to me a fundamental challenge in thinking the new political geography before us.

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