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Over Both Edges: Coyotaje, Militarization and Liminality in Everyday Life on Ranchos along the South Texas-Mexican Border

Lupe A. Flores

This article moves beyond stereotypical/nativist images of coyotes and migrants as smugglers and people who must be kept out of the U.S. nation-state. I present empirical data gathered through auto/ethnography and reflections that complicate negative discourses about unauthorized border crossings, social processes inherent to what scholars call autonomous international migration or coyotaje by but not limited to Mexican migrants. In coyotaje zones in Hidalgo County that I refer to as riverspaces, interpreted by media and policymakers as a places of narco-warfare littered with drug and human smuggling, more than “lawlessness” occurs. I highlight the liminal experiences people live through as coyotaje manifests in a border region that is increasingly policed and militarized. This briefly portray how I came to document dramas of border crossings to present on-the-ground observations of them; the last section addresses obstacles confronting the nightmarish imaginaries about U.S.-Mexico border spaces. Ultimately, this article calls for a rethinking of U.S border enforcement legislation and of public discourse that tends to demonize the subjects dealt with in this article.

The data and reflections throughout this essay apply the directive set forth by Josiah Heyman and Howard Campbell, who urge scholars and documenters of culture and history to go beyond issue-driven fieldwork in order to capture “insight into the more mundane but equally important aspects of economic, social, political, and cultural life on the border” (207). Building on David Spener’s groundbreaking research and interpretations found in his book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border*, I approach *coyotaje*¹ with as much intimacy as curiosity. Using auto/ethnography as a guiding force, I conducted fieldwork in ranchos along the South Texas-Mexican border, where *coyotaje* occurs almost daily. Thus, I was not only positioned as a researcher in the field, but also as an individual enculturated into the atmosphere of border-crossings since childhood through my own social ties with participants of such practices. I rely largely on personal experiences growing up around and recording these incidences from 2008 to 2012 while a university student and scholar-in-training in anthropology.

Coyotaje is, in essence, part of everyday life *en los ranchos*; it is found in the realm of the mundane. But it also lends itself to post-structural analysis, as Spener shows us that social

relations and power dynamics reconfigure between migrants and coyotes as *coyotaje* manifests in unpredictable terrain (*Clandestine Crossings* 187-193, 199). He also reminds us that the U.S.-Mexico border, especially at checkpoints, at international bridges, and within the range of a patrolled South Texas landscape, is a region where state authority over human-labor mobility through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) creates a border space rampant in global apartheid (*Clandestine Crossings* 15-16). Still, one of the most interesting realities explained in Spener's work is the performance of *resistencia hormiga*² by migrants and coyotes at the border – in zones where “dangerous and subterranean activity” (Heyman and Campbell 207) in the form of *coyotaje* abounds.

It is important to distinguish the time period in which I began documenting border-crossings to that of Spener's. The infamous “Border Wall” did not physically exist in South Texas during the 1990s or early 2000s, when Spener did his fieldwork. Now, a little more than 17 years into Operation Rio Grande and with the Secure Fence Act of 2006 in full effect, border-crossings in zones along the South Texas-Mexican border that I call *riverspaces* are subject to evermore possibilities of detection, apprehension or injury to the social actors involved. As this article went to press, the nation's discourse on immigration has been heightened with more and more pressure from the political right, and even the counter left, to spend billions more dollars and deploy thousands more military-trained agents to border areas in the name of American security from an “immigrant takeover” and narco-terrorism. Spener foreshadowed the “new dynamism” of crossing conditions that result in such expansive interdiction. Spener claims in *Clandestine Crossings*:

Old fording spots that had not been patrolled might now be; trails through the brush that once were free from motion sensors might now be under surveillance.

Vehicles and agents that one week were concentrated in on an area the following

week might be deployed in another. Thus, the border-crossing strategies that were successful last winter might not be in the spring. (169-170)

This change in crossing conditions was noticeable in my fieldsite. One can now observe helicopters hovering above and Border Patrol vehicles cruising the ranchos below; even sensor technologies are noticeable as more apprehensions take place in zones that, until recently, were relatively less patrolled and thus safer to cross undetected.

My overall intention throughout this article is to illuminate a different picture and suggest a different discourse on U.S.-Latin American migration and clandestine border crossings in order to complicate the governmental and public rhetoric that places migrants and coyotes on par with narco-terrorists, that constructs them as “dangerous to the body politic,” undesirable and requiring inhumane legislation to keep them, the “Others,” out, as Jonathan Xavier Inda argues in his article “The Value of Immigrant Life” (148-150). As I will show, *coyotaje* in ranchos along the South Texas-Mexican border takes the form of liminal experiences in a geographically liminal space where anything is possible, where a crossing can go horribly wrong and simultaneously really well despite the many obstacles that come forth in clandestinely returning individuals back to their homes or new jobs in the U.S.

This is by no means an exhaustive account of *coyotaje* en los ranchos; there is much to relay, but the clandestine and legally-dangerous nature of *coyotaje* makes it hard to apply traditional modes of ethnographic documentation, a fact I’m struggling with as I prepare to further research *coyotaje* as a graduate student. My methods are largely informal and rely heavily on the practice of auto/ethnography, a methodology founded in self-reflexivity in conjunction with cultural and social analysis as applied to a community the writer-observer has ties to. In addition to on-the-ground observations of border enforcement conditions on the Texas side of the Mexico-U.S. border, I observed and did participant-observation in border-

crossing scenarios. Thus, I rely largely on fieldnotes and stories that I wrote down after meeting crossers on their journey or talking with coyotes, as well as my subsequent reflections on the occurrences. My conversations with them happened intermittently, they were often short, and I did not record anything (many times I did not have an audio recorder on me). Future research methods will employ a rigorous interviewing style to incorporate in my writing life and family histories of border crossers I encounter. Nevertheless, I contend the methods used and the interpretations found here are apt in describing the liminal and subjective realities of *coyotaje* as it happens around daily life en los ranchos.

Literature Review

Scholars within anthropology and sociology have analyzed the ways in which the nation-state and a nativist public demonize the idea of Latin American, and especially Mexican, migration and practices such as clandestine border crossings, including the coyotes who help in the navigation process. Negative images of clandestine migration and the actors involved have in turn been placed into policies that racialize and criminalize individuals as “illegal aliens” and that heavily rely on border policing and militarization (Andreas; Chavez 22-23; De Genova, *Working the Boundaries* 62-63; Dunn; Inda 140; Nevins 2002; Rodriguez 28; Rosas 51; Spener, *Clandestine Crossings* 202-215, 232). In response to both the U.S.-Mexican nation-state’s intense approach to militarizing border areas, anthropologists and sociologists, through ethnographic research, try explaining the complex pictures of the social realities they find happening on the ground as they relate to topics such as migration, border crossings, militarization, apartheid, and so on. There is much to understand from the sociality that allows alternative practices like *coyotaje* to unfold as a resistant strategy against nation-state actions aimed at halting both legal and illegal migration. In the contexts of *coyotaje*, Spener and Nestor Rodriguez have both noted that undocumented migrants and coyotes more than likely share a cultural characteristics and a

working-class background, making the later more understanding toward the former as both share common economic plights (*Clandestine Crossings* 231; “Battle” 28). Spener mentions how the typical imaginary of coyotes as the sole guides who navigate migrants and tend to abandon and rob them at any time they please is misleading; he contends, although there are bad coyotes, this is the only image state authorities want of coyotes as they represent, like autonomous migration overall, a challenge to state authority and a “threat to the image of state bureaucrats concerned with keeping their jobs and advancing their careers” (203). He, then, suggests that “focusing analytically on *coyotaje* rather than on any single type of coyote allows us to expand the scope of inquiry to include a wider variety of strategies and practices that a broader range of social actors have developed to make possible migrants’ surreptitious entry to the U.S.” (94). Spener contends that such an approach retracts interests in furthering stereotypes of coyotes but leads “toward a more nuanced and realistic view of how clandestine crossing of the border occurs, both now and in the past” (96).

This article moves beyond the stereotypical images of coyotes and migrants (and ultimately the border crossings strategies enacted by them) in order to illuminate the importance of rethinking the interdiction strategies continually enforced, today now more than ever, in the South Texas-Mexican border region. Santiago I. Guerra, an anthropologist who studied drug trafficking and its effects on his community of origin, employed an auto/ethnographic approach to his work. No such approach, to my knowledge, has ever been applied to the study of *coyotaje*. It is my belief that auto/ethnographies of the border, what some call “intimate ethnographies” (Waterston and Rylko-Buer 405) have the potential to contribute valuable insight to the debates on migration through and militarization of the region. As more people from border areas come into scholarship and activism in order to speak out against constant demonization of friends and familiars, such critical *testimonios* can contribute to the

national realization that individuals subvert the law to make ends meet or to simply help a friend, a close relative, even a stranger, in need. Given the unequal economic and political structures that make up U.S.-Mexico relations, that is probably not such a bad thing, yet it is politically and publicly constructed as negative to the point of enacting discriminative legislation against whole populations.

Intimately-Positioned Research or, How I Came to Document Border-Crossings

Stories involving the migratory phenomenon known as *coyotaje* unfold every day in the South Texas-Mexican borderlands. Individuals with real-life problems, necessities and obstacles pass through the ranchos nestled between the Rio Grande and Military Highway, both of which stretch hundreds of miles. Running from *la migra* and toward an unclear future, these “unauthorized” individuals relentlessly attempt reaching their destination, wherever further up north that may be. Regardless the time of year, they endure scorching summer days, severe thunderstorms, *y dias hasta dias cuando el aire se conjela* (even days when the air freezes over). They are determined, desperately holding on to their goal of getting across the Rio Grande and the rapidly urbanizing landscape of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas.³ But first, they must reach their initial stop: *una casita por los ranchos*, to be taken in by a coyote and transported to a ciudad where they either live or want to live in.

As a young boy, I witnessed multitudes of border-crossers at once and the solitary *indocumentado* run toward the havens that are los ranchos where I spent my childhood. Today when I visit or stay over, I sometimes find myself spontaneously *conversando con migrantes*, providing hydration and nourishment to those who stop by the nearby house famished, tired, and sick from their long trek from Mexico, Central or South America.⁴ The ranchos and the scenery along the Rio Grande and Military Highway are sites rich in cultural and natural history. Despite hyper federal intrusion in the area in the form of a border wall or levee-fence,

autonomous international migration and *coyotaje* are historical and ongoing occurrences here (Spener, *Clandestine Crossings* 96-115; 118). Yet the force of interdiction reverberates around daily and community life by the Rio Grande. It is through this view from the river, a panoramic spot, where I can see the multifaceted reality behind the international migration story. Following Renato Rosaldo's definition of the "positioned (and repositioned) subject" in ethnography (7), I have long occupied a "position" in a "structural (and intimate) location" on the border; this has allowed me to embody a "particular (and intimate) angle of vision" (19) from where to observe and talk about *coyotaje*. This essay also reflects what Mary Louise Pratt calls an autoethnographic text, a different way of representing the self and community by engaging "in response to or in dialogue with those texts" (35) already produced about conquered and colonized subjects, such as those exploring *coyotaje*. Not only is this essay informed by an awareness of my privilege as a researcher, I depend on another position, one of life-long connections to the communities by the river. Due to this positioning, there is no solely objective analysis of social phenomena here. It must be kept in mind that things do not have to be this way; they are made this way.⁵ This stretch of borderlands is no stranger to conquest, colonization, structural poverty and racism, ongoing militarization or global apartheid,⁶ as mentioned in the introduction. Thus, *coyotaje* is some of the border ranch folk's armor against working-class wages and interdiction that affects more than just coyote actors. My positioning, then, also comes from an academically-informed culture, one that recognizes alternative imaginaries of complex sociocultural processes that might otherwise be constructed as "immoral" and as a danger to national security. Writing on the salience of borderlands subjectivities (such as sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food, or taste), Rosaldo enforces the idea that, even if they are outcomes of conquest and symbolic

violence, social border zones (and I'll include the physical border) must be treated "as sites of creative cultural productions that require investigation" (208).

Suited in army-green uniforms with Oakleys or Raybans across their faces, the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents, now in their twelfth year under the control of DHS and in larger troves than ever before, litter the land of my people with their units driving to and from the levee-roads. *La migra* is clearly aware that, at times, their senses and technology fail them. At an earlier point in my life I was a little grateful for their services as I naively wrote in my journal, "for now one truly knows the ultimate intention of the crossed."

That was until I began hearing the sincerity, desperation and longing for a worthwhile and comfortable life, or simply the desire to return home, recited through their dry, thirsty voices. It only makes sense for these people-made-migrants to partake in such bold, nomadic and humanistic moves as a means of survival (and some upward mobility) from westernized neoliberal countries that only seem to oppress the most vulnerable of their citizens.⁷ As I readily attended to their needs, I always tried offering relief by assuring them that everything was fine in the meantime, and I wished them luck once they continued their journey. Unlike the men in green, I was not there to capture them like stray dogs. I was to help their person; I was there to help them defeat another day of hunger and thirst – of possible death – so that one day they can continue generations here as did *mi abuelo* and many men and women before him.

If border agents turned their necks and spotted me amid what, to me, became just another generous deed, they would quickly assume I myself am a coyote. Perhaps, spiritually, I am. Maybe I'm just a compassionate human helper on a universal scale – something beyond sovereign government and border enforcement. Now I find myself serving another role: that of auto/ethnographer. And I find it imperative to complicate an otherwise trivial significance toward international migration and border crossings as expressed by nation-state and media

actors, even anti-immigrant American citizens, as they speak out against a social phenomenon they believe is wrong and should thus be enforced at any cost.

Bridging Objectivity and Subjectivity, Legality and Illegality

Before I could cite scholars in anthropology and sociology studying migration as resistant and socially-embedded strategies, I was only interested in documenting the border-crossing experience. Early on I encountered the dilemmas between objectivity and subjectivity in writing since, before 2009, I was a student reporter majoring in print journalism. While writing about border crossings before I took this undertaking as a serious ethnographic project, I struggled to silence the subjective angles since, as per my training, I had to remain objective and present both sides. Yet I constantly found muted the experiences of migrants and coyotes in the news stories. Amid failed hopes that I would eventually write human-interests stories on *coyotaje* for the student newspaper, something called me to anthropology. As I explored and learned to utilize the academic literature, affirmation slowly came to me as I read up on the topic all the while witnessing *coyotaje* unfold before my eyes. I concluded that I was researching *coyotaje* well before I knew I could ever do so academically, and that there was more to understand than what the news leads the public to believe. I read Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Luis A. Urrea, Ted Conover and Jorge Ramos, but none of these authors quenched the thirst in me to bridge my personal experiences of *coyotaje* with objective or subjective interpretations. In most of the literature, this social phenomenon is almost always handled with indifference or minimal, negative interest. Renato Rosaldo's seminal work *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* extends Anzaldúa's idea of the borderlands into anthropology and ethnography. It was this book that helped me realize that even the idea of occupying multiple positions alone does not make a case for subjectivity in research. That is why it is also important to develop the multiple frames of references needed to study any kind of social phenomenon. This, as Rosaldo

puts it, entails reflection on the multiple positions researchers occupy throughout their life experiences, which can enrich researchers' understanding of the subject(s) of study, such as death and bereavement in cross-cultural context or, in my case, having personal and academic perspectives on undocumented border-crossings. He writes, "Because researchers are necessarily both somewhat impartial and somewhat partisan, somewhat innocent and somewhat complicit, their readers should be as informed as possible about what the observer was in a position to know and not know. Has the writer of ethnography on death suffered a serious personal loss?" (67). One of my inquiries is to ask if my subjective explorations in documenting *coyotaje* and the liminal realities experienced by border crossers can prove insightful in the present discourses of clandestine migration and border militarization.

As I stated here and in an *Anthropology News* article titled "An Undergraduate Perspective on Coyotaje," never in my life did I choose this position of close proximity to *coyotaje* except now as an academic in training. But as I came of age and naively entered college, something inside me clicked as I delved in the literature, from literary fiction to ethnographies, though James Clifford claims neither is inseparable since ethnographers, like scientists or novelists; produce partial truths (6-7). What I once considered a burdensome feeling of knowing the reality of *coyotaje* as inescapable to my being, coupled with scholarly inquiry, turned into a different sense of unsettlement, an urge to find and create interpretations that fit and that do not distort, demonize or hinder comprehension of social practices, regardless of their "illegal" nature or the negative, often objective and biased representations of them. In this aspect, Spener proved influential in my overall framework: He was the first academic I read that took a chance at understanding not just coyotes but the larger network of social relations that compose *coyotaje*. Although his position was not so connected to his research site or subjects, his

approach was partial to their experiences and explanations rather than using a completely impartial method of documentation.

Guerra has written on the “borderlands of the law” effect between the practices of the ethnographer’s self and those of subjects from a community of one’s own with a present and history of illicit activities. Straddling legality as an anthropologist and U.S. citizen and illegality as an illegal borderlander, an “unwilling co-conspirator” to “illicit activities” that occurred in his rural Mexican-American community, Guerra learned to walk the fine line between the legal and illegal worlds he inhabits. In his dissertation and in an *Anthropology News* article titled “Becoming an Il/legal Anthropologist,” he embraced the ambiguity of his positions in what he calls “the borderlands of legality and illegality, of good guys and bad guys, of us and them, which has proven difficult for others to interpret.” His work is one of the few that masterfully combines such intimate and academic perspectives in order to portray ethnographic data from a field that is also the researcher’s home. His work assured me that applying auto/ethnographic methods during the study of events as illicit as *coyotaje*, despite the obstacles, can and must be done.

Riverspace Geography, *Coyotaje* and Everyday Life en los Ranchos

The “violence fighters” on this part of the South Texas-Mexican border cruise the land in their vehicles hoping to catch what they, the media and policymakers call “illegal aliens” in action. They find them dead or injured near the river, or eagerly catch them on the run. But these are everyday aspects of life on the border, on the last stretches of the U.S. edge with Mexico: It is demanding, risky, terrifying, ruthless and overwhelming, all the while empathy and compassion fissure within and around the social field in which *coyotaje* takes place.

The river, as admitted by migrants whom I’ve encountered and those interviewed by Spener in his book, is sometimes not the most dangerous part of the journey. By the time some

crossers reach the Rio Grande, they have already traveled on foot for days, if not migrating by bus or vehicle to northeastern Mexican states (where they further prepare for the crossing). For many, more obstacles run northbound; the prickly *chaparral* and ranchlands of South Texas are just as strenuous as those found south of the river. To an elderly person or young child, confronting a scorching, semi-arid desert environment with minimal resources can be daunting and arduous, if not deadly. Imagine what seems like endless walking only to come across a meandering gorge in the earth with two 16-foot banks to cross over and an additional 18-foot border wall to hopefully circumvent in order to reach safety.

Riverspace, or the liminal geography encompassing the U.S.-Mexico riverbank and the surrounding areas, is still an obstacle for many people. The Rio Grande, as many locals, crossers and coyotes have stated, can, at any given moment, become a dangerous place for tired bodies even when things are going well in terms of the crossing.

Crossing Account I

I extracted the following information from notes I took on an occurrence in a rancho in May 2012. A *coyota* (female coyote) who helped in the rescue of a fainted woman crosser provided the information the day after. In a rather bold move, the coyotes risked their invisibility to get her to la casita – to get her to safety. It was, like, many other times, a close call:

A woman and her brothers successfully crossed the Rio Grande. Once on the Texas side, the woman, in her early 50s, fainted coming up the banks [toward the safe house, a half-a-mile from the river]. Upon knowledge that there was a person missing, the coyotes sent the mechanic (who usually assists in the process) to look for her. He rode a yellow mo-ped toward the riverbank in search for the fainted crosser. Minutes passed until he found her covered with ants and what appeared like foam in her mouth. He called another participant to bring a

truck to take her to the house. They did. Once inside, they quickly gave her a cold shower, rubbed alcohol on her chest and made her smell it in hopes that she would regain consciousness. She did, but kept convulsing. They gave her two large bottles of gatorade; she quickly chugged them and started calming down. One of the woman's brothers stayed behind and took care of her the rest of the night. This morning, just a few hours ago, they are waiting to be taken back home, where they said they would seek a doctor. All seems calm now, yet I can't erase the image in my head: the woman lying half-dead, foaming at the mouth with ants covering her midriff and arms. And to think if BP (Border Patrol) were to stop this coyotaje instance, they would have the people involved arrested and the human crossed away in portable cages and "voluntarily deported" back to Mexico.

Not short of a tragedy, this occurrence could have ended in a person's death or in a manner such as an earlier *coyotaje* instance in April 2012.

Crossing Account II

The following is a reworked account of my fieldnotes: A group of five *indocumentados* attempted crossing the Rio Grande through the same riverspace. I was not there when it happened, but managed to arrive the next day with fresh news of the occurrence. They successfully crossed and were supposed to head over the levee-fence and come down toward the safe house, but instead went straight into the *chaparral*—into the small section of dense *mezquite* and *huizache* brush now partially enclosed by the border wall, a slab of concrete stamped on earthen levees. The coyotes on the U.S. side explained to me how, confused, the crossers walked in the wrong direction, causing the patrolling *migra* to spot them. Reluctant to surrender, most of them ran further into the enclosed brush, a move that only worsened the circumstance of their crossing

as a chase shortly ensued. During the pursuit, a man ran into a wasps' nest and became instantly surrounded and stung by them; the other man tripped coming up the levee and broke a leg. The Border Patrol called the nearest ambulance to aid in the scene meters from la casita. The coyotes could only watch, from below, the failed border crossing unfold on top of the levee-fence that surrounds the rancho residences.

Later that day, a coyote said he was fortunate local media stations were not contacted because it could have ended badly in terms of transparency. He and others in the area are no strangers to “legal” accusations of “alien smuggling.” And the area is only subject to small-scale media coverage: stories of failed border crossings labeled as “smuggling” or “trafficking,” stories of border wall and international bridge construction, and even less often, stories about the local communities and events concerning historical periods and persons in the region. The people in these communities, especially the elders, stay afloat on local and national media issues, so when they hear of certain newsworthy “illegal” happenings or memorial occasions in an area involving people they know or are related to, they tune in to the local news outlets for the coverage. The information eventually becomes their short-lived gossip. Sometimes, the process of crossing (and being crossed) is seamless, so the stories that go around are verbal retellings of actual events seen by some and only heard by others.

As Spener mentioned in his book, such clandestine activity is an “open secret” along the U.S.-Mexico border. “Strategies and tactics of clandestine border-crossing,” he writes, “are already well-known to the authorities,” such as DHS and BP (*Clandestine Crossings* 239). In the rancho riverspaces of South Texas and Mexico, this “open secret” is like a cat and mouse chase. When clandestine crossings occur within this particular riverspace, they do so between the realms of success and failure, arrival and capture, health and fatigue. The stories become harshly real – they become stories of possible death, of what could have happened to them (the

crossers) and us (the *coyotes*) if the woman would have died (and she very well could have, they assert, had the *coyote* helper not found her within the short time he did) or if *la migra* were to catch them mid act? There is always a mixed atmosphere of caution, vigilance, fear and more often than publicly acknowledged, empathy and compassion lingering in this extension of liminal geography that forms the edges of the South Texas-Mexican border.

Sometimes, as children play in backyards (as I did), a small group or couple of crossers will run downhill and pass the playing children, as a *coyote* signals them to quickly enter the vehicle for immediate transportation out of the *rancho*. Sometimes, there is no time to dry-up and change.

Crossing Account III

During a particular instance I witnessed one weekend in the summer of 2011, a young man and woman came running down toward la casita. I was outside, so I had a perfect view of them running down as fast as they could. Once they reached the safe house, *la coyota* (the one who helped the fainted woman crosser) instructed them to enter a room in the back of another house, where fresh clothes awaited them. What appeared to be a successful arrival turned into a scene of momentary panic. The woman, already changed and drinking a glass of water, started hyperventilating as she sat near the kitchen bar. *La coyota* sat next to her while her male co-crosser and boyfriend sat behind them in a state of exhaustion; he just stared intensely as *la coyota* helped calm the woman. She continuously told her to relax and to take deep breaths. *La coyota* massaged her arms, hands, and back as she talked to the shivering woman in a motherly tone. Minutes passed and her shivering and panting lessened. The woman began talking again. She exclaimed how scared she felt. "*Pero todo va salir bien,*" *la coyota* assured her. And everything was. Another coyote actor, a little over an hour later, successfully transported the couple to their destination a few cities away.

We see in this case, as in the stories before, elements of a successful border crossing laden with ambiguity, which shows how *coyotaje* as a social instance is subject to liminal phases – or happenstances – that manifest during the crossing process. Coyotes and migrants can prepare all they want (i.e., use their social capital and funds of knowledge to know where to go, what to pass to get there, who will be waiting, and with whatever resources they can obtain, etc.), but coyotes and migrants are not always sure if they will make a successful crossing, let alone without fatigue or physical strain, which can prolong the crossing process or create more degrees of difficulty. Migrants many times find themselves unsure of what will happen, sometimes exhausted beyond consciousness or extremely anxious and paranoid; they always think and ask about what is happening, if they will make it at all. Sometimes, the outcomes are not always pleasant even if successful, as the stories presented thus far illustrate.

Crossing Accounts IV and V

The following text is an excerpt from fieldnotes I wrote in June 2010:

It was a little after 8:00 am when I awoke to the sound of people breathing heavily and whispering. Aware of the situation, I jumped out of the sofa-bed I slept on and stared blankly at the wall until I decided to ask the middle-aged women sitting on the couch next to me, “*como esta el rio?*” “*El rio esta calmo, pero esta carajo,*” she responded calmly, finally resting her exhausted body. “*Me gararon y tuve que regresar.*” The woman told me she already waited 15 days in an Edinburg home that, to her misfortune, got raided days before our encounter. She and the two others came from Guerrero where they were visiting family. Their clothes were slightly damp and ate food from the kitchen cabinets as they waited for pick up. I learned later in the conversation that they crossed with the

same coyote they contracted the previous times. Within two hours, they were taken out successfully.

This is a more positive story despite the fact that one of the crossers was caught before this attempt. She was caught, but made another attempt, where I would encounter her that early June morning. Her experiences waiting 15 days and being subsequently deported after the raid tell of the undetermined amount of time some crossers must wait to reach their destination as well as of the experience of deportability inflicted on her by U.S. law. Years later, considering De Genova's conceptualization of how "illegality" is lived through a sense of palpable deportability," of how "migrant illegality" is a "spatialized social condition inseparable from the particular ways that Mexican (and I include other Latin American) migrants are likewise racialized as 'illegal aliens' – invasive violators of the law, incorrigible 'foreigners' subverting the integrity of 'the nation' and its sovereignty from within the space of the U.S. nation-state" (215), I could not help but regret my naïveté then in not asking her more probing questions about her experiences. Fortunately, as I mentioned in my short journal entry, the woman and her small cohort arrived to their home undetected. But after that I have no idea of her life story or other crossing experiences, just of my failure to ask.

I witnessed another instance in March 2012 where three individuals from Guatemala, who were bilingual in K'iche' Maya and Spanish, waited in a Donna house. When I entered the home, they sat watching television; bags of fast food and water jugs littered the living room. Apparently, they were lost and ended up in the house of a *coyota* who was unrelated to their *coyotaje* network. They nevertheless negotiated with the young woman, and they were soon making calls to Mexico, Guatemala as well as New York. It was an intense half day waiting to see if they were going to be picked up by another group for transportation to the eastern U.S. interior. The younger male and female couple was headed for New York and the older woman

for New Jersey. According to the young woman who became their *coyota*, whom I knew by association, the *guatematecos* had been on their journey for more than two months, spending thousands of dollars trekking through three countries and crossing two international borders. Their bright, name-brand clothes were slightly damp from the warmth of the tidy house, which did not have air conditioning. I could see a slight rash on the older woman's back, perhaps caused by the heat or the scratchy material of her pink and white striped collar shirt. It was their second day waiting at the house and the woman was charging a hundred dollars for hosting them. She acknowledged that she could ask for more, but that the crossers were not from her network to begin with, and she felt she could do them the favor of helping them get to where they needed to go at a low cost. Later that day, I constantly thought of the situation, the intensity of it all. I was blown away in a moment of romanticization as they spoke in K'iche' then switched registers to Spanish as they negotiated their mobility on the telephone. Then I internalized the situation, remembered that neoliberal forces promote the experience of symbolic violence, which, as I observed, reverberates across populations, cultures, and borders. I learned two days later that after another day of waiting, the individuals were driven past the Falfurrias checkpoint and headed north.

**Against Militarized and Apartheid State(s): Toward a Humanistic Outlook on
Clandestine Migration and *Coyotaje***

Spener presents the effects of structural and cultural violence on people who live at and pass through the Northeastern Mexico-South Texas border. In his article, "Global Apartheid, *Coyotaje* and the Discourse of Clandestine Migration: Distinctions Between Personal, Structural and Cultural Violence," he clarifies how these two forms of violence pursued on behalf of the U.S. nation-state and its federal employees create policies laden with ingredients for structural and personal violence committed against migrants by coyotes and state agents, which in turn

produce public discourses through the media that assume the worst of coyotes only (“Apartheid” 119): That they desert their human “cargo,” that they are greedy and capitalistic, and that they aid terrorists in entering the country. Spener postulates the focus on personal violence performed on migrants by coyotes is the preferred discourse disseminated in mass media outlets since it distracts a general, ignorant public of the larger forms of structural and cultural violence continuously performed on migrants and coyotes by nation-state actors, such as DHS employees and other privileged classes (“Apartheid” 129-136). After all, it is they who gain from a system of global apartheid designed to keep the rich on top and the poor (in this case, working-class Mexican and Latin American migrants) on the edges of U.S.-Mexican law and territory – on the edges of the Rio Grande riverspace where both countries meet.

Coyotes are aware of the stigmas and stereotypes filtered through the news about their line of work since they are consumers of television media like others in their community, as mentioned earlier. This is why coyotes try their best to remain invisible and undetected, so they will not get caught and legally assumed a purveyor of criminal activity and be charged so. Coyotes know that they are being watched, just as they study, from both sides, the Border Patrol driving in and out of *el rio*. This dynamic creates the sense of alarm, vigilance and fear of detection present at any given moment of any given day in riverspaces where a form of *resistencia hormiga* takes arm. As Spener and Rodriguez have made clear, autonomous/ clandestine migration may be understood by its actors as “illegal” but it is never “criminal” or “immoral” since one is performing a service for the other’s eventual entrance into life in the U.S. (*Clandestine Crossings* 91; “Battle” 29). Social capital is involved as well, such as mutual trust even if the actors involved are strangers. Additionally, certain cultural funds of knowledge are transferred through migrant communities, which allow individuals to consider certain migration strategies with whomever and through wherever experienced folk deem most

trustworthy and successful (Spener, *Clandestine Crossings* 171-178), like certain riverspaces in the LRGV.

Undocumented border crossing is a serious endeavor, understood as such as by both migrants and their “providers of navigation.” Thus, most coyotes I have encountered do their best in performing the service since they know handling a life, or multiple lives, is a fragile reality: fragile because of the harsh circumstances and tragedies that may befall in the process of clandestine migration and because of the “legal” and social ramifications they both face if caught. An issue I am interested in researching and writing more about is the complexity within and between different *coyotaje* networks and how some perform more humanistically (or humanely) than others in order to clarify the ways *coyotaje* manifest in various liminal geographies.

I would now like to give more, albeit brief, time to the Rio Grande riverspace, that serves as a divider of and culturally interconnected nation-states and their peoples. Spener states:

[. . .] the act of border-crossing on the part of Mexican migrants represents a liminal, proto-Chicano moment for them. It is, in many ways, a rite of passage not only in geographical terms, but also in cultural and social terms. Although they may never become fully bicultural or shift their cultural point of reference of Mexicans in the United States, the act of crossing the border represents a passage into a new cultural space that will influence their attitudes and perceptions from that moment on. (“Cruces clandestinos y movidas rascuaches” 11)

Spener’s attribution of “liminal rites of passage” to border crossers entering new U.S. “cultural space” is sufficient in the subjunctive assumption that they can always successfully and

healthily cross. I believe that the state-sanctioned act of apartheid policies and policing along the South Texas-Mexican border, as well as the state's production of "illegality" that renders migrants deportable, border transformed the Rio Grande itself into a harbinger of crossers' liminality before and after they swim or wade across rancho riverspaces since many of them are subject to episodes such as the experiences I detailed in the earlier sections of this essay. Thus, the Rio Grande represents an ever-liminal riverspace of undetermined possibilities (positive and negative) as long as people have the option of clandestinely crossing through it in their performance of *resistencia hormiga*. I also believe that, since the Rio Grande has always been, and will always be located where it is at (with the exception of changes in the river channel morphology) and, because since 1848 it has been used and re-used as the U.S. nation-state's boundary apparatus, crossers' liminality always exists before and after they cross since they are always mentally burdened (worried, unsure) about the present and future outcome of their successful or unsuccessful border crossings. As De Genova argues, they are relegated to a social space of illegality with real and sometimes horrifying repercussions. Once in the U.S. interior, despite how far in, migrants know they are still subject to detection and deportation, a culture of surveillance and border inspections, as suggested by Spener ("Narrativas del mal" 384), Lynn Stephen (*Transborder Lives* 154-177), and Alejandro Lugo (*Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts* 115-116, 143), respectively, so exposure anywhere outside the border sometimes means a return back to it. And more than likely, migrants will re-attempt clandestinely crossing the Rio Grande, perpetuating the undetermined possibilities of a successful or failed border crossing. This is the phenomenon I am interested in, that liminal period that anthropologist Victor Turner refers to as the period individuals are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by the law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95), a moment "in and out of time" (96). As I have shown in the stories above, such liminal

experiences around the Rio Grande riverspace can serve as lessons about resistance and humanity, about neoliberalism and symbolic violence, which should be at the forefront of migration discourse and policies.

Concluding Remarks

Interdiction is ultimately aimed at controlling the migratory flow of working-class peoples across nation-state boundaries such as the Rio Grande and, ultimately, keeps them on the fringes of “modern” society. At the same time, media conglomerates take a nativist stance when reporting “illegal” goings-on committed by “foreign” and “smuggling” actors. In doing so, mass media reports perpetuate nation-state rhetoric (law) that keeps “Americans” in a different sociocultural and physical space from border-crossing “illegal aliens,” a space of racialized “illegality” as theorized by De Genova (*Working the Boundaries* 8). The Rio Grande, then, serves as one location in the low-wage regions (as opposed to high-wage regions) where mobile working-class populations are expected to remain for the sake of feeding late industrial capitalism; it is a location of global apartheid as explained by Gernot Kohler (406). Although border crossers and coyotes enact strategies that allow them to socially and culturally overcome such apartheid system through *coyotaje*, they are sometimes forced to return and once again survive – against all odds – the obstacles present at any given moment as they cross the Rio Grande. Coyotes, only a part of the whole social network that composes migrants’ transnational relations, are not all necessarily bad people. Until this is recognized at the federal and local level, the public, the media and the state still will likely keep their defenses up toward the resistant strategy against apartheid, militarizing regime that has no regards for the welfare of individuals engaging in systems other than its own.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge Alexander Pysklywec, who was the first person to read and comment on my initial draft before I even thought of submitting an abstract to the 2013 NAACS Tejas Foco conference.

He encouraged me to explore my positionality in my research, so I am indebted to him for his enthusiastic encouragement. Miguel Diaz-Barriga, who I consider my occasional unofficial mentor, helped me formulate my arguments and pushed me to think about positionality and coyotaje in complex ways I thought I could not yet do. Thanks to the reviewers for their suggestions, this enriched the scope and aims of this article. Finally, my eternal gratitude goes out to the individuals whom I've crossed paths with at the border. I hope this is only the beginning of my redemptive strategies to document their border-crossing experiences which have been inexplicable to mine as a human being and researcher of the border, my home. Mil gracias y habrasos a todos!

Notes

¹ This paper follows David Spener's definition of *coyotaje*, which he describes in his book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* as the following: "The set of border crossing strategies and practices elaborated by coyotes at the behest of and in concert with migrants, migrants' friends and family members, and/or migrants U.S. employers" (95). Scholars differentiate between immigrants (who move to a country to definitely settle there) and migrants (who tend to migrate back and forth from home to host country). For the purpose of this paper, I use the terms migrants because, as scholars in anthropology and sociology have shown, individuals migrating to the U.S. from Mexico and other countries develop various social ties that interconnect their community of origin to their new communities in the host country (Glick Schiller et al. 52). Although they can be referred to as transmigrants, because of limited space, I cannot elaborate on how the people I met become transmigrants as they fashion their lives and influence events in more than one country, so I will only use the term migrants. I will use the terms autonomous international migration and migration interchangeably. The terms "immigrant" and "immigration," as De Genova explains in his 2002 article, assumes a unidirectional teleology since it presumes an individual's permanent settlement in the migrant-receiving country like the U.S. (420-21), so I refrain from using them.

² Spener's conception of autonomous international migration, extracted from the one proposed by Nestor Rodriguez, is embodied by what he terms *resistencia hormiga*, a neologism inspired by migrant and resistance terminology as well as a few theoretical frameworks woven together. In short, the term considers clandestine migration (undocumented border-crossings) as a resistance strategy underscored by social capital (Bourdieu) and "cultural funds of knowledge" (Velez-Ibanez 163), which give migrants socially- and culturally-induced weapons with which to fight their way to a modest income, stable family, and life – weapons such as mutual trust (needed to negotiate with coyotes) as well as knowledge of whom to seek and where, and perhaps even chances to attain false papers and/or job recommendations. Mexican and other migrants' surreptitious navigation and social negotiations to do so are forms of resistance against global apartheid performed at the South Texas-Mexican riverbank and throughout the region (Spener, *Clandestine Crossings* 188-199).

³ A considerable amount of literature exists detailing the obstacles migrants (who are usually border crossers) endure throughout their lifetimes of trekking across international boundaries (which causes them additional struggles once inside the migrant-receiving nation-state). For local research on the subject, see Richardson, *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, and Pelados*, and Richardson and Resendiz, *On the Edge of the Law*; for accounts of clandestine migration, border crossings, and working-class life in other or similar regions, see the work of the following scholars: Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*, Leo R. Chavez's *Shadowed Lives*, Nicholas De Genova's *Working the Boundaries*, Alejandro Lugo's *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts*, Gilberto Rosas's *Barrio Libre*, David Spener's *Clandestine Crossings*, Lynn Stephen's *Transborder Lives*, and Carlos G. Velez-Ibanez in *Border Visions*. For an archaeological/ethnographic approach to undocumented migration, see Jason De Leon's research article "Undocumented migration, use war, and the materiality of habitual suffering in the Sonoran Desert" published online in the 2013 *Journal of Material Culture*.

⁴ I have seen and heard first-hand, the stories of coyotes and crossers when they talk about who crosses and from where. Although some historical research suggests otherwise, sometimes, in this particular riverspace, coyotes refuse transporting Chinese migrants because of the apparent unusuality of the situation if seen by BP. Latino clandestine crossers can disguise themselves as everyday family members coming out of the ranchos, while people with major phenotypical differences can bring a higher level of suspicion and thus get them all caught, according to coyotes.

⁵ Since both Spanish and American empire took hold of the “border region” and within the nation-state at large, certain working-class people with multi-ethnic roots became marginalized by their elite, lighter-skinned Spanish-Mexican kinsmen and by Anglo-Americans whose progressive ideals they followed. Additionally, a marginalized section of Mexican nationals inhabit U.S.-Mexican border states as they migrate in hopes of employment unavailable in their home states or country. Because of the Lower Rio Grande Valley’s large agricultural economy, impoverished community formations such as *colonias*, in essence, are migrant-receiving communities. The LRGV has the largest migrant populations and thus the most *colonias* in the U.S.

⁶ For great discussions on recent efforts to militarize and perform global apartheid at the U.S.-Mexico border, see Timothy Dunn’s *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992*, Joseph Nevins’ *Dying to Live: A Story of U.S. Immigration in an Age of Global Apartheid*, and Spener’s book *Clandestine Crossings* and article “Global Apartheid, *Coyotaje* and the Discourse of Clandestine Migration: Distinctions Between Personal, Structural and Cultural Violence.” Miguel Diaz-Barriga and Margaret Dorsey are involved in current research efforts on the infamous “Border Wall,” which was strongly opposed by South Texas residents but still erected by the Department of Homeland Security in efforts to thwart migration and border violence as a result of narcoterrorism; see their articles “Border Walls and Necro-Citizenship: The Normalization of Exclusion and Death on the U.S.-Mexico Border” and “Beyond Surveillance and Moonscapes: An Alternative Imaginary of the U.S.-Mexico Border Wall.”

⁷ Spener claims that the very process of *coyotaje* is a household survival (as opposed to political) resistance strategy on behalf of migrant and coyote actors against U.S. nation-state policies aimed at marginalizing, criminalizing and discriminating foreign “others” and their international navigators, while keeping its native citizens at the apex of national, social and cultural hierarchies. Such policies then make way for alarmist and nativist public discourses fueled by the media (see De Genova’s *Working the Boundaries* and Spener’s *Clandestine Crossings*.) Although Mexico receives remittances from migrants working in the U.S., it has similarly attacked its native citizens (who are prone to migration) and their coyotes. And as Gilberto Rosas reminds us in *Barrio Libre*, we must not lose sight of Mexico’s own complicity in creating the political-economic conditions that force Mexican migrants to cross borders.

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