

## **The ABCs of migration costs: Assembling, bajadores, and coyotes**

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### **Abstract**

In efforts to avoid detection by border enforcement agents, undocumented migrants from Latin America often risk life and limb to enter the U.S. Most commonly, they walk two to four days through an inhospitable desert in hopes of being picked up and whisked away to their final destination. Cost in human lives notwithstanding, the price of this venture correlates to increased border enforcement. Interviews with repatriated migrant women on the border helps uncover this economic “underbelly” of transnational movement in what I dub the ABCs of migration costs: those related to assembling, bajadores (border bandits), and coyotes.

**Keywords:** smuggling; bandits; women; border; crossing

### **“Con un Peso en La Frente”**

In March of 2007, I sat in a stark office space provided by the managers of the migrant shelter, Albergue San Juan Bosco, in Nogales, Sonora. I was nearing the end of a year-long study, “Women at the Intersection: Immigration Enforcement and Transnational Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border.” The aim of the study was to systematically document migrant women’s encounters with immigration enforcement authorities. On this night, the hazards inherent in the migration process had once again surfaced with an outbreak of armed violence in Arizona, allegedly between rival bands of human smugglers. Five undocumented immigrants were killed in these incidents, two of whom were women (Quinn and McCombs 2007). It was in the context of this event that Marcela’s story resonated.

Marcela had migrated from the Mexican state of Hidalgo hoping to reach Texas where she had family. Tragically, she had been abandoned in the desert after she fell and her injury prevented her from keeping up with the rest of the migrant group as they were briskly led by their coyote through the desert. She had wandered in the desert three days after being abandoned before being picked up by a border patrol agent and repatriated to Mexico (O’Leary

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2009a). This evening, upon reflecting on her ordeal, she recalled the coldness with which her *paisanos* agreed to leave her behind, and the callousness with which the coyote considered her, and ultimately, her misfortune. After all, she observed indignantly, to coyotes, migrants represent nothing more than a cash commodity: “*¡Así nos ven, con un peso en la frente!*” [“That is how they see us...with a price on our head!”].

Marcela’s cynical remarks were intelligible in light of increased poverty in Latin America and the extent to which risk and the cost of safety is factored into the migration process. In this paper, stories shared by migrant women help illustrate what I dub the ABCs of migration costs: those related to assembling, bajadores (border bandits), and coyotes (human smugglers). All of these add up to a formidable financial burden disproportionately shouldered by the most economically destitute.

### **The costs of migration and border enforcement on the Arizona-Sonora border**

Since the implementation of the Southwest Border Strategy<sup>1</sup> and the adoption of measures to seal the border, Nogales, Sonora, like other border cities, has experienced exponential growth due to the influx of migrants on their way to the U.S.—and back again, via repatriation or deportation (Castro Luque, Olea Miranda, and Zepeda Bracamonte 2006). Its approximately 200,000 inhabitants<sup>2</sup> also lies 55 miles south of Tucson, Arizona, and within a corridor created by the Southwest Border Strategy that essentially “funnels” migrants on their way to the U.S. through more remote, and therefore more perilous routes which predispose migrants to death (Cornelius 2001; Rubio-Goldsmith, McCormick, Martinez, and Duarte 2006) and injury. Nogales, therefore, resembles a highly congested “intersection” where two salient but diametrically opposed processes converge: transnational movement and border enforcement (O’Leary 2009a; 2009b).

The present research was conducted in 2006-2007 at a migrant shelter, Albergue San Juan Bosco, in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, where women who had been repatriated by the U.S. Border Patrol were interviewed about their border crossing experiences. Like so

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<sup>1</sup> This strategy involved the intensification of border closures known as Operation Hold the Line (1993), Operation Gatekeeper (1994), Operation Safeguard (1995). See Nevins (2002).

<sup>2</sup> According to the city’s webpage, [http://www.municipiodenogales.org/mapas\\_Nogales.htm](http://www.municipiodenogales.org/mapas_Nogales.htm), in 2005, Nogales, Sonora, had 189,756 inhabitants.

many other migrant shelters that have sprouted along the U.S. Mexico border, Albergue San Juan Bosco is dedicated to the temporary relief for repatriated migrants who upon their release from the custody of U.S. immigration enforcement authorities find themselves without a support system in the area. Guests at the shelter typically stay only one to two days before they either attempt to re-enter the U.S. or return to their communities of origin. It was because of this that a Rapid Appraisal (RA) method of data collection was chosen for the research.<sup>3</sup> The centerpiece of RA methodology is engagement in problem-solving dialogues with stakeholder communities in relatively short but often multiple field visits to the study area to get at the heart of the issue being investigated (Clift and Freimuth 1997). In RA, interviewees are active participants in the interview process and a semi-structured topic guide is used as checklist of issues that are pertinent to the study. It is expected that not all topics will be discussed with all interviewees and that in fact each interview may depart from the basic questions to pursue interesting, unexpected, or new information. The emergence of data is enhanced by observation and secondary information (triangulation) and in this way RA enables the collection of detailed information on the issues that are of greatest importance to both the individual interviewee and interviewer. .

### **The “ABCs” of migration**

An appreciation of the increased costs of migration begins with the assumption that legal entry is nearly impossible for resource-depleted migrants who are unable to provide authorities with required proof of economic stability (e.g. employment) and material wealth (e.g. property, bank accounts). Costs thus include those that related to assembling—the pooling together the necessary resources to undertake the journey north—in addition to those associated with avoiding apprehension and exposing them to banditry and human smuggling. The rising costs of migrating have particularly grave implications for women migrants. Castro Luque and her colleagues (2006) have documented a dramatic increase of 32 percentage points in the percent of women migrating through Nogales, Sonora, from 4.9 in 1994 to 37.1 in 1998. It has also been ar-

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Chambers might be the scholar most commonly associated with pioneering “rapid rural appraisal” techniques (Carruthers and Chambers 1981). Beebe (2001) provides a comprehensive history of the adoption of the method in a wide range of disciplines. Often known by different names, RA remains consistent with the early procedures advanced by Chambers and others.

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gued that this dramatic rise in female migration is related to the neoliberal structural adjustment policies, such as those introduced by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, that have resulted in the feminization of poverty in many other developing countries (Marchand and Runyan 2000; Sadasivam 1997). The current study shows that an overwhelmingly majority of women are “*madres solteras*” (single mothers) so it can be assumed that more women are coping alone with increased poverty by migrating (O’Leary 2009b).

### *A is for Assembling*

The cost of migration thus begins with those who are expended as the journey north is undertaken and include the following.

**Loans and Interest:** To finance the initial migration journey, many migrants borrow the money or may put up their meager properties as collateral.

**Travel:** The initial cost of the journey to the border varies by mode of transportation and point of origin. The majority of migrants to the U.S. come from Mexico’s southern and central states. These are states that are decidedly resource-disadvantaged in terms of basic indicators of “well being” such as average education level, household infrastructure, and access to health services. Thus, it is important to consider that general transportation fares are proportionately more for resource-disadvantaged populations than for those who are more advantaged.

**Supplies:** These may include the food consumed on the trip north, as well clothing items such as shoes. For those crossing the desert on foot, jackets, backpacks, water gallons, food, and electrolytes are a must.

**Lodging:** An important characteristic of the Nogales urban landscape is the proliferation of small hotels, “*hotelitos*,” that serve as interim safe houses for migrants while the necessary arrangements with coyotes are made.

Given the possibility of losing what was expended upon arrest, many opt to try again to cross the border. Reina, a migrant woman at the shelter, was on her way to the U.S. to join her husband when she was apprehended. Her husband had worked in the U.S. for four years. She borrowed 1000 pesos (about 100 dollars) and would be accumulating 200 pesos (about 20 dollars) a month in interest. This financial burden weighed heavily on her decision to return home after being apprehended (field notes of 5/4/07). In contrast,

Agustina, was determined not to return. She borrowed 1,500.00 pesos (about 150.00 dollars) against her parents' land so she planned to stay in Nogales long enough to save that money to send home and pay the lender and then work more to pay for her return. She explained there are people who are well off who make these deals with people who are willing to cross and many lose their land, which is the only thing they have, if they cannot make it across the border. She said that these rich people make them sign a legal document and as a result, they legally lose their land (field notes 3/9/07).

The difficult decision to try again involves paying for the shuttle ride for the two-hour trip west to Altar, Sonora, the proverbial *antisala* ("waiting room") for migrants going north (Valdez-Gardea 2009), at a cost of about 110 pesos (11 dollars), plus the 30 peso toll on the road from Altar to Sasabe. This pattern of repatriation and re-entry thus assumes a circular pattern that may be repeated several times—until migrants either succeed, or, physically and emotionally spent, give up and return home.

### **An economy of scale**

The magnitude of the expenditures associated with reaching the border and repeat crossings cannot be comprehended fully without considering the scale of apprehensions in the Tucson Border Patrol Sector alone. According to the Department of Homeland Security website<sup>4</sup> the Tucson Border Patrol sector, which includes Nogales, led all other sectors with 439,090 apprehensions in 2005 when all field offices were considered. Arizona has also had the most voluntary departures, an administrative procedure in which migrants who are arrested are simply "removed" from the U.S. In this way, "removal" is differentiated from court-ordered "deportation." Indeed, many migrants may be apprehended and released several times before being charged with "illegal re-entry after removal." When found guilty of this charge, migrants serve sentences, after which they are deported. Even so, of those migrants who are removed or deported, it has been estimated that over one third reentered the U.S. without authorization.<sup>5</sup> The vast majority of the detainees in Arizona, roughly between 75-90 percent, are serving sentences for illegal re-entry after removal and even

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<sup>4</sup> Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2005, Data on Enforcement Actions Table 36, available at <http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/>. Accessed 3/11/07.

<sup>5</sup> This figure is taken from a June 9, 2005 article in the *Arizona Daily Star*, Tucson, Arizona.

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through progressively longer prison terms are imposed on those who are re-apprehended based on the number of times they have been charged with this violation (Alvarado 2004). The high recidivism attests to the economic imperatives that outweigh the risk of serving longer prison terms if re-apprehended. As long as the economic conditions that prompted their migration to begin with remain the same, reattempting to cross is a viable option. With failure, families in sending communities may need to come up with additional funds to pay for the bus fare home, medical costs if needed, losing in the process the initial financial outlay and any hope for economic relief that work in the U.S. would provide.

### *B is for "Bajadores" (Bandits)*

Adding to the cost of migration are those associated with the almost-certain assault from "bajadores," bandits who take advantage of remote migration routes to rob migrants. The name, "bajadores" comes from "bajar," the Spanish verb meaning "to pull down," and refers to the tactic of forcing victims to pull down their pants at knifepoint or gunpoint to keep them prostrate and to facilitate a body-cavity search for valuables. Gladis, a migrant woman who was part of a group of 18 explained that when they encountered bajadores, there was already another group of about 50 migrants who were being robbed. This larger group was searched extensively for hidden valuables and money. Because of this, Gladis' group was spared with only a cursory demand for cash. She handed over her 50 pesos and considered herself fortunate because she was not forced to strip or hand over other personal belongings (field notes 3/6/07).

For Florencia, age 20, however, it did not go so well. A slight and soft-spoken woman from an agricultural community in Oaxaca, she explained how they had been robbed:

*"Nos robaron... Nos quitaron el dinero,... vimos a tres. Veníamos como ocho, a uno le quitaron \$1500 pesos, a otro \$800, a otro \$300, nosotros le dimos \$1500, y ya no hay nada porque nos quitaron todo....Si no traes nada, te van a pegar"*

[They robbed us... they took our money, there were three. There were about eight of us, from one they took \$1500 (pesos), another \$80, and another, \$300, we (her and her husband) gave him \$1500 and now there is nothing because they took everything away...if you don't bring anything, they will beat you. (Field notes 5/4/07)]

### *C is for "Coyotes"*

The term, *coyote*, refers to a human smuggler. A discussion with almost any border denizen will refer to the traits shared by human smugglers and their name-sake. Like the four-footed desert creature, human smugglers disappear into the environment—usually when migrants are apprehended. If per chance they are apprehended with their group, they also blend in with the others, frustrating officials' efforts to identify him/her for prosecution under Arizona's harsh anti-human trafficking statute.<sup>6</sup>

The label *pollero* (from the Spanish, "*pollo*", chicken), is often used interchangeably with coyote. It also has its analogous reference. In this analogy, migrants are much like chicks, and a guide who is responsible for keeping group members together though the often arduous trek through the desert is like a mother hen. Through the interviews and indeed throughout the border region, "coyote," *pollero*, and "*guia*" (a more neutral word and Spanish for guide) are often used interchangeably, and when the question is asked about whether there was a distinction among them, it was more likely to make for a lively conversation rather than any consensus.

The idea that coyotes' fees are increasing is borne out in published accounts although these are sporadic. For those contracting coyotes in the late 1980s, migrants reported paying as little as \$50-\$200 a piece (Conover 1987). A decade later, Spener (1999) reports that the price of crossing the Texas border at the Rio Grande and reaching Houston or Dallas was rising from \$500 to \$700 per person to \$1000. At that time, migrants reported that \$1000 was not too much to pay. However, there is variance in the costs which are also related to the smuggling route, and the smuggling mode. For example, the interviews of women in the present study revealed various modes of crossing: Some climbed over the border fence, through underground tunnels, packed in vehicles, and others crossed through the official port of entry in cars with falsified documents. This latter mode was the most expensive, costing

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<sup>6</sup> House bill 2539 and Senate Bill 1372 (Human trafficking violations) were signed into law on March 14, 2005. Commonly referred to as the "Anti-Coyote Law," this law defines and prescribes penalties for unlawfully obtaining the labor or services of a person, sex trafficking, trafficking of persons for forced labor or services and smuggling of human beings. In a perverse manner and out of frustration by authorities, the law has been routinely applied to migrants charged with smuggling themselves into the U.S.

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nearly \$3000 per person. However, it was by far the safest, especially if women and children were crossing.

Garcia Castro's later research (2007) shows that fees may also vary based on social relationships between migrants and known coyotes, "*coyotes comunitarios*." With these coyotes, the crossing process is not only an economic contract but one forged from a social obligation to help and to remain in good standing with members of one's social network. Based on the coyotes' relationship with clients (family members, former clients, friends or relatives of former clients), coyotes comunitarios offer discounted rates and in this way they help reduce the cost of migration as well as the risks associated with crossing with the aid of someone who feels no social obligation to ensure their safety. For example, an interview with Rosita in February of 2006 reveals that because the contracted coyote was a friend of the family, she would be charged a discounted rate of \$1,100, and because she would be bringing her baby, he would arrange for the shortest route possible.

However, there is some evidence suggesting that women and children are differentially treated based on the perceived liability for the guides (O'Leary 2008). Yesenia (field notes 4/20/07), for example, a migrant woman from Chihuahua, recounted how her coyote seemed reluctant to guide them through the desert because they were accompanied by slower-moving women and children. He tried to dissuade them by asking the women if they knew how long they would be walking:

*"¿Sí saben cuanto van a caminar?...van a ser tres noches, quizás cuatro porque vienen niños"*

[You do realize how much you are going to walk?... it will be three nights, maybe four because you are coming with children.]

They replied that they were determined, but after all was said and done, they were ultimately left behind.

### **Adding it up: The costs of stage migration**

The cost of migration necessarily includes those expended over time and are related to "stage migration" of entire families. Stage migration is a term defined by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) and refers to the piecemeal reunification of families that begins with the initial migration of an adult and continues with the subsequent migration of spouses and each child over a period of time. For example, Rosita (field notes 2/22/06), explained that her parents left their children in Paracho, Michoacan 10 years ago when they migrated to the U.S. At that time, Rosita was nine, the oldest of four.

The children were left with the grandmother and aunts and Rosita helped raise her younger siblings, the youngest of whom was a little over one year old. Over the years, Rosita's parents had arranged for the children to migrate to the U.S. and be united with their parents. Rosita was the last of the siblings to make the journey. With a child of her own now, she now conceded to fear, which is why she would not attempt to enter the U.S. again. On the next day, Rosita and her husband would go to the local family services agency, *Departamento para la Integración Familiar (DIF)* to ask for financial assistance to return to Paracho. Once there, she did not know how they would make a living, but she could not bear for now the alternative, as others had, to leave her "chiquito" behind.

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