

“Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border”

by

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Paper prepared for presentation on June 11, 2009 at the
XXVIII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Panel CSM034, “Migration, Religion, and Language”

Abstract

In this paper I analyze the origins, usage, and connotations of a variety of official and colloquial terms in Spanish and English that are used routinely in the vernacular discourse about border crossings made by undocumented Mexican migrants to the United States. I focus especially on Spanish-language terms that are used to refer to migrants and the service providers they hire to help them reach their destinations in the United States, emphasizing the implications that the use of different terms has for the framing of the migration experience. Terms for migrants that I discuss in the paper include *mojados*, *mojarras*, *patos*, *pollos*, and *alambristas*. The names for migration facilitators that I discuss include *traficantes*, *contrabandistas*, *bajadores*, *pasadores*, *pateros*, *polleros*, and *coyotes*. In addition, I discuss some of ways in which these terms relate to one another in the discourse of clandestine migration.

Key words: human smuggling undocumented migration border studies Mexico folklore

In my study of the clandestine border-crossing experiences of Mexican migrants over the last decade or so, I have been struck at the creativity, complexity, and rhetorical richness of lexicon that has arisen as a way of talking about these experiences. The terminology that appears in the discourse of clandestine migration has arisen from multiple and conflicting perspectives on the process. Both the migrants who cross the border and the government agents that seek to regulate migratory movements have their own, distinct ways of talking about what goes on at the border and which often convey quite different connotations to the listener. Another set of direct participants in the social field of border-crossing are the service-providers that migrants hire to help them evade detection and apprehension by government agents. These service-providers, too, have their own ways of talking about border-crossing, which sometimes coincide closely with those of migrants, and other times diverge markedly. In conducting my research, I have been surprised not to find any published works that systematically document the Spanish lexicon of migration that appears in the vernacular discourse of Mexicans and Chicanos, much less relate it to the lexicon used by U.S. government authorities to describe the same phenomena. This paper represents an attempt on my part to begin to redress this gap in the literature on Mexican migration to the United States.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I review a set of terms that appear frequently in the official, state-sanctioned discourse about clandestine migration. In the second section, I introduce a variety of colloquial terms used by Mexicans and Chicanos to refer to migrants, discussing their origins and connotations. In section three, I turn to the names that Mexicans and Chicanos give to the service-providers that migrants hire to help them get across the border. I discuss these terms' origins, regional distribution, frequency of use, and connotations, as well as the ways in which they mutually define one-another. In each section, my presentation and analysis are based on a combination of published sources I have consulted along with field observations and interviews I have conducted with migrants, migration facilitators, government agents, Catholic priests and nuns, and human rights activists in Texas and in the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, and Guanajuato (see Spener in press).

TERMS USED BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND THE NEWS MEDIA

Government officials in the United States refers to clandestine border-crossers as *illegal aliens* and those that assist them in their unauthorized entry into the United States as *alien smugglers* and *human traffickers*. News reports repeat these terms, but also routinely speak of *illegal immigrants*, sometimes shortened to *illegals*, or *undocumented immigrants*, the latter term serving as a less pejorative alternative that responds to the concerns of human rights activists who have insisted that no human being is either “illegal” or an “alien.” Given the penetration of the mass media into

virtually all sectors of their society, Mexicans may also use the terms *ilegales* and *indocumentados* in everyday conversation to refer to unauthorized migrants in the United States. Members of the U.S. Border Patrol and other U.S. Department of Homeland Security agencies also sometimes refer to the migrants they pursue and capture as *EWIs* [ee-weez], so designated because they have entered the United States “without inspection,” although many have, in fact, come into the country through a legal port of entry using false documents. In conversations among Border Patrol agents, captured EWI’s are often referred to as *bodies*, as in one agent asking another, “How many bodies did you get today?” For Border Patrol agents, non-Mexican bodies are *OTMs*—other-than-Mexicans—a term that Heyman (1995:268) reminds us is an indicator of the extent to which the Border Patrol is a special paramilitary force dedicated to policing civilians of a single nationality, so much so that all non-Mexicans are lumped into a single, undifferentiated, residual category. Around 90 percent of “deportable aliens” apprehended by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security each year are Mexicans.¹

At the global level, official discourse also speaks of “human trafficking,” with the corresponding terms “traffickers” and migrant “victims of trafficking.” The meaning of the term “human trafficking” became established in international law in 2000 with the signing of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, which defined trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (Laczko 2002). Legally-speaking, “human trafficking” is to be distinguished from “human smuggling,” where the latter, in the U.N. Protocol, refers to the “procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident” (Laczko 2002). In other words, trafficking involves traffickers taking physical control over migrants in order to exploit them, while smuggling involves migrants hiring smugglers to get them into a country whose government has not granted them legal entry.

In practice, government officials in the United States and Mexico routinely conflate trafficking and smuggling, a conflation that is often repeated in the press in both countries, such that

¹This figure is based on my calculation using data contained in table 34 of the 2007 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2008:92). It includes apprehensions made throughout the United States, not just along the border with Mexico.

“smugglers” are often referred to as “traffickers” in English and *traficantes* in Spanish. *Contrabandistas* is used less frequently in the Mexican press, and when it does appear it is often as a literal translation of the term “smuggler” offered by some U.S. law enforcement official (see, for example, Agencia EFE 2007; Notimex 2003) or as a translation from a U.S. wire service report (see Associated Press 2003). Although “smugglers” hired by Mexican migrants sometimes in reality turn out to be “traffickers” as defined by the U.N. Protocol, such is not the case for the vast majority of the many thousands of Mexicans who hire a “smuggler” to cross the border annually.² In addition, the use of the term “trafficker” by government officials and the press rhetorically links surreptitious border-crossing practices with drug-trafficking and its attendant evils, even though the authorities have not established that any systematic, border-wide connection exists between the two unauthorized flows (see Fuentes and García 2009 and Spener in press).

A particularly malevolent variation on the role played by “traffickers” on the U.S.-Mexico border has been the emergence of what U.S. law enforcement authorities have referred to as *rip-off crews* and are known in Spanish as *bajadores* (Carroll and Glenn 2007; Farah Gebarah 2007; Gonzalez 2003). These gangs dedicate themselves to the armed kidnapping of groups of migrants being transported by “smugglers” in order to extort the migrants’ families for ransoms that may exceed the amount that they expected to pay to the “smugglers.” This violent crime of opportunity takes advantage of the fact that migrants do not usually pay the full amount charged for their transport until they arrive in their final U.S. destination. The *bajadores* who kidnap migrants know that their relatives have already been prepared to pay their loved ones’ transporters substantial amounts of cash before the kidnapping takes place. The press and law enforcement authorities often presume that these crimes involve one gang of “smugglers” stealing a “load” from another gang, though it is not always clear if the *bajadores* themselves in fact engage in “alien smuggling” as well as kidnapping.

² Although there have been documented instances in which migrants have been lured into involuntary servitude by their coyotes, the prevalence of actual trafficking of Mexican migrants along the U.S.-Mexican border overall appears to be fairly limited relative to the number of migrants using coyotes to enter the United States. Indeed, a recent G.A.O. report found that very few cases of trafficking in the United States had actually been documented by law enforcement authorities since 2001 (United States Government Accountability Office 2006). Moreover, the report found that government estimates of the total number of people trafficked in the United States were unreliable and might well turn out to be grossly inflated. Wong (2005:80) has also noted that published statistics about the prevalence of human trafficking world-wide are “highly dubious.”

COLLOQUIAL TERMS FOR MEXICAN MIGRANTS

In Mexican popular culture, migrants and their co-conspirators in unauthorized border crossing go by a variety of folkloric names, which vary by what segment of the 3,000 kilometer-long border they are crossing. Between Ciudad Juárez-El Paso and Boca Chica, where the Río Bravo del Norte flows into the Gulf of Mexico, migrants must make an aquatic crossing into the United States and are consequently known as *mojados* [wets]. The English-language equivalent of this term—*wetbacks*—has historically been used in a highly pejorative way by U.S. residents, although no disrespect is necessarily implied by Mexican Spanish-speakers who use the term *mojados*. Bustamante notes that the “wetback” label arose in the 1920s after the establishment of the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924:

[The migrant’s] status was changed in 1924 from being one of many migratory workers almost certain that his entry without visa would not bring any sanction, to that of a fugitive from the law constantly hiding to avoid apprehension and expulsion from the country. He was labeled a “wetback” (Bustamante 1981:42).

In Tamaulipas and elsewhere in both countries, unauthorized Mexican border-crossers are also referred to in a jocular play on words as *mojarras* (see Cerda, Cabaza, and Farías 1953:159; Galván and Teschner 1985:80; and Ramos Aguirre 1994:4), the name of a small fish—*Cichlasoma cyanoguttatum*, “mojarra del norte”—that swims the international boundary and whose maritime cousins are heavily fished for food elsewhere in Mexico (Desert Fishes Council 2003). Although I have not seen it in the literature nor have I had field informants mention it to me, this raises the possibility of an odd kind of metaphorical cannibalism on the border, in which human *mojarras* hook and eat their ichthyoid namesakes. This possibility is not out of the question, given stories migrants have told me about catching and eating rabbits, snakes, and armadillos on their treks through the Texas brush country.

Both *mojados* and its English equivalent are often used generically to refer to any unauthorized Mexican migrants, regardless of which part of the border they have crossed. Nevertheless, west of Ciudad Juárez-El Paso, unauthorized border crossers are sometimes known as *alambristas*, which, according to the Real Academia Española (2009) refers to an *acrobata* “que efectúa ejercicios de equilibrio sobre un alambre” [a tightrope-walking acrobat]. Migrants crossing the western stretches of the border are called *alambristas* not because observers think of them as tightrope walkers, but rather because they have to climb over, crawl under, or cut through the *alambre* (wire fence) that has historically marked the border in places like Tijuana-San Diego, where there are no natural geographic features that separate the two countries (García 2002; Samora

1971:6). *¡Alambrista!* was also the title of a Chicano film in the cinema verité tradition that came out in 1977 and received considerable critical acclaim for telling the story of a Mexican man's experiences as an undocumented immigrant in the United States (Chávez Candelaria, Aldama, and García 2004). Today, of course, the border in Tijuana-San Diego is imposed in the form of a metal wall rather than a wire fence. A similar wall has been in place between the two Nogales on the Arizona-Sonora border since the mid-1990s. At the time of this writing, approximately 700 miles of new walls are being constructed along the U.S. border with Mexico. Even after the new walls are completed, much of the western border will remain unfortified, consisting at most of a barbed wire fence (Hylton 2009; Powell and Carroll 2008).

COLLOQUIAL TERMS FOR MIGRATION FACILITATORS³

Four colloquial terms are commonly used by Mexicans to refer to the people who help migrants enter the United States surreptitiously. Two of these, *patero* and *pollero*, are specific to different regions of the border, while two others, *coyote* and *pasador*, are used border-wide. Three of the terms, *coyote*, *patero*, and *pollero*, are decidedly folkloric in character and merit considerable discussion. The fourth term, *pasador*, is rather more literal in character and, consequently, merits shorter treatment here. Moreover, today *pasador* is by far the least commonly-used term among Mexicans. In this section, I will consider the origins, uses, and connotations of each of these terms, in order from least to most-used, and then discuss how each of these terms and others are employed to describe networks or organizations that move migrants across the Mexico-U.S. border.

Pasadores

The most literal of the Mexican colloquial terms used to refer to people who take undocumented migrants across the border into the United States is *pasador*. It derives from the use of the Spanish verb *pasar*, which is frequently used to refer to border-crossing, whether the crossing takes place along the Río Bravo del Norte or between the two Californias. It is also used in Spain today to refer to people who bring migrants across the Strait of Gibraltar by boat (Kunz 2005). *Pasar* in these instances is used in this sense as a synonym with *cruzar*, as in *¿Pasaste por el río o por el puente?* [Did you pass through the river or over the bridge?] or *Yo conozco a un señor que se dedica a pasar gente al otro lado* [I know a man that takes people across to the other side of the

³ A few years ago while making a presentation on my research to a group of Mexican colleagues at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, fellow migration scholar María Eugenia Anguiano challenged my use of the term “smuggler” in the presentation. It was, she said, a needlessly pejorative term, noting that migrants were not objects to be “smuggled” and that not all the “smugglers” were serious criminals, but were instead *facilitadores* [facilitators] of migration. Her comments provoked a serious reconsideration of the terms I used to describe what I observed in my field research into the process of clandestine border-crossing.

border]. The term *pasador* is used infrequently these days, but it does appear in a number of historical references. For example, Samora (1971:73) in his classic study *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story*, used the term *pasador* as a synonym for the “smugglers” who worked along the border in the 1960s:

If [the migrant] gets the money for the trip, he may look for a local agent or just an informant who will put him in contact with a *pasador*. Arrangements will be made for the *pasador* to meet him at some Mexican border town. ... If the young man has no contacts either on the Mexican border or in the U.S., he may go to a border city on his own and begin walking around the main square or along the river in search of *pasadores* ... who will smuggle him to the U.S.

Samora’s use of the term is consistent with the Real Academia’s definition of *pasador* as “una persona que pasa contrabando de un país a otro” [a person who passes contraband from one country to another, i.e., a smuggler] (Real Academia Española 2009).

Writing in the 1970s, Lewis (1979:44-45) also referred to *pasadores*, but specified that they limited their services only to taking migrants immediately across the border, whether this was a quick run from Tijuana into San Diego County or crossing the Rio Grande at Ciudad Juárez-El Paso. Writing about the situation prevailing in Ciudad Juárez-El Paso in the 1980s, anthropologist Marilyn Davis found that guides who led migrants only across the river but no further referred to themselves as *pasadores* and insistently distinguished their job from that performed by *coyotes*, who led migrants on far riskier journeys on foot through the desert into the U.S. interior:

We pass people on rubber rafts or inner tubes because sometimes there are people who don’t know how to swim. I think in California they say coyotes because they have to cross over the mountains at night. It is very dangerous and they know the terrain. They know exactly where to go. Here it is different. We pass people during the day, mostly at eight o’clock in the morning, because that’s when people have to go to work. Then, here and there people want to cross during the day. But we don’t work at night because it’s too dangerous. Here we call ourselves guides or *pasadores* (quoted in Davis 1990:131).

In the early 1990s I observed the “water taxi” service provided by *pasadores* from the Santa Fe bridge connecting downtown El Paso with downtown Ciudad Juárez as they paddled customers across the river in a rowboat. This “in broad daylight” service ended in September 1993 when the Border Patrol launched its Operation Blockade to deter unauthorized entries by migrants and local residents from Ciudad Juárez. In their report on the operation, a team of researchers from the University of Texas at Austin referred to these *pasadores*—one of whom they interviewed—by another name derived from the verb *pasar*: *pasamojados* [passers of “wets”] (Bean et. al 1994:91). I heard this term, along with *pasadores*, while working on the UT research team, but I have not heard

it elsewhere. Although I have found other mentions of *pasamojados* in the research publications, in literature, and in newspaper reports (see, for example, Campbell 2008; Carlos Cano 2000; El Mexicano 2007; and Sanmiguel 2008) all of them have referred specifically to events taking place in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso area, suggesting that its use is particular to that specific section of the border.

Pateros

In Northeast Mexico, where aspiring migrants must wade, swim, or paddle across the Río Bravo del Norte, the people who take them across the river are often referred to as *pateros*. Use of the term on the Tamaulipas border with Texas appears to date back at least to the first decades of the twentieth century during the time of U.S. Prohibition. Then, as now, *pateros* not only took people across the river, but merchandise as well. In both cases the purpose of the service they provided was to enable those who hired them to avoid having the contents of the boats inspected by government immigration or customs authorities. During the years of the Bracero Program (1942-1964), *pateros* transported migrants not only into the United States, but back into Mexico as well. The reason *braceros* went back into Mexico on the *pateros*' boats was to avoid shakedowns by Mexican customs agents who knew they would be coming back from the United States laden with their dollar earnings. Unfortunately for migrants, the *pateros*, too, were notorious for relieving them of their money (American G.I. Forum of Texas and the Texas State Federation of Labor 1953:29). This reputation was illustrated in a telling passage from Luis Spota's 1948 novel *Murieron a mitad del Río*, in which a man from the border warns some novice *braceros* from the interior not to hire the services of *pateros* to cross the river:

No hay noche ... que no pesquen algún ahogado en el río. Los “*pateros*” trabajan sin cansarse. ... Los que pasan gente en sus lanchas. Gente como ustedes, *mojados*. Matan para robarlos. ... Cuando traen buenos dólares los matan. A puñaladas o con pistolas. Luego les amarran una piedra, y al fondo. Muchos salen hinchados a la orilla. Y la policía, en la luna (Spota 1948:21).⁴

Pateros' reputation for criminal misdeeds has also been given voice in several popular corridos [ballads] from the region, including “El Güero Estrada” [Blondie Estrada] a killer immortalized on an

⁴ **English translation:** Not a night goes by ... when they don't fish some drowned man out of the river. The *pateros* work tirelessly. ... The ones who take people across in their launches. People like you, wetbacks. They kill in order to rob them. ... When they come back loaded down with dollars, they kill them. Stabbing them or with pistols. Then they tie a rock around them, and it's right to the bottom. Later, they swell up and float to the shore. And the police, they're nowhere to be found.

LP titled *Contrabandistas y pateros*, recorded in the 1970s by the trio Los Alegres de Terán, who hailed from the town of General Terán, Nuevo León.⁵

One might presume that the term *patero* derives from guides referring to the people they take across the river as *patos* (ducks), but I have only seen or heard migrants referred to in this way a few times in publications or in my field work. Indeed, in his *Diary of an Undocumented Immigrant*, Pérez notes that the guides with whom he crossed the Río Bravo in Nuevo Laredo in the early 1980s referred to their clients not as *patos* but as *chivos* [goats] due to the strong body odor they emitted owing to the fact that they typically hadn't bathed in several days by the time they arrived at the border (Pérez 1991:16). Nevertheless, at least two Mexican informants I interviewed in the early 2000s offered *pato* as the origin of the term *patero* when I asked them if they knew where the term came from. Both were educated professionals. One worked in the Mexican consulate in Brownsville, Texas and said that because on that stretch of the border migrants came across the river, they were called *patos* and the people taking them across were *pateros*: “Ahora bien, en el caso de los migrantes, aquí en la zona fronteriza, porque los cruzan por el río, por eso se habla de ‘pato’ o ‘el patero,’ ¿no?”⁶ The other was a supervisory agent with the Mexican migrant protection force Grupo Beta based in Matamoros, who had this to say:

Se adecuan para las regiones. Por ejemplo aquí lo denominan ‘patero’ porque a las personas que está cruzando se las denominan ‘patitos’ porque están pasando por el agua. En otras regiones les dicen ‘polleros’ porque a las personas les dicen ‘pollitos’ porque van en esa calidad, asignados en vehículos, en compartimientos muy estrechos, en que las personas, para ellos es un ‘pollito’, ¿verdad?⁷

The press also occasionally links the term *pateros* for migration facilitators to the term *patos* for undocumented immigrants, as in the headline from a Tamaulipas newspaper about an arrest in Ciudad Miguel Alemán that read “Aprehendido ‘patero’ con ‘patos’”⁸ (Sánchez 1998). One should not rely on such press accounts to accurately reflect the actual origins of the term, however, since reporters and editors frequently engage in word play of one kind or another to enliven their text. So, for example, when U.S. immigration inspectors working on one of the international bridges connecting Matamoros, Tamaulipas and Brownsville, Texas were discovered collaborating with

⁵ For an analysis of the text of this corrido, see Spener 2003.

⁶ **English translation:** Well now, in the case of migrants, here along the border, since they cross through the river, people talk about “duck” or “patero,” right?

⁷ **English translation:** They vary by region. For example, here they call him “patero” since they call the people who cross “ducklings,” because they’re going through the water. In other regions they call them “polleros” because they call the persons “chicks,” since that’s how they travel, stuck into vehicles in tight compartments, the persons. So, for them [the polleros] it’s a “chick,” right?

⁸ **English translation:** Duck-man apprehended with ducks.

Mexican accomplices to bring undocumented migrants into the United States, they were dubbed by the Spanish-language press as the *migra-pateros*, with *migra* referring to the colloquial expression for the U.S. immigration authorities (Méndez Martínez 2001).

A number of scholarly sources cast doubt on the derivation of *patero* from the colloquial reference to migrants as *patos* in the Rio Grande Valley. Tamaulipas historian Francisco Ramos Aguirre, for example, attributes the term to a type of small boat traditionally used on the Río Bravo:

El término “patero” se aplica en la frontera tamaulipeca a quienes se dedican al tráfico ilegal de persona a través del Río Bravo; mientras que en Tijuana y en Sonora a estos delincuentes se les conoce como polleros. El uso de la palabra “patero” podría tener su origen allá en los primeros años del Siglo XX, cuando audaces contrabandistas de licor pasaban su mercancía hacia los Estados Unidos utilizando pequeñas lanchas fabricadas con madera y lona gruesa, conocidas con el nombre de “patos” (Ramos Aguirre 1994:105).⁹

Galván and Teschner (1985:89) support Ramos Aguirre’s account of the derivation of “patero” from “pato” in *El diccionario del español chicano*, which defines “pato” as a “small raft with canvas sails used in fording rivers (esp. the Río Grande/Río Bravo by illegal immigrants from Mexico to the U.S.” and “patero” as a “smuggler (esp. one using small rafts—patos—to smuggle goods across the Río Grande).” Similarly, Cerda, Cabaza, and Farías (1953:180) in their *Vocabulario español de Texas* define a “patero” as “una persona que opera un pato o lanchita para pasar personas a través del Río Grande sin pagar el impuesto de inmigración”¹⁰ and a “pato” as “una lanchita de lona para pasar personas a través del Río Grande sin pagar el impuesto de inmigración.”¹¹ In keeping with this definition of “pato” as a type of launch, today migrants may also talk about crossing the Río Bravo by hiring the services of a *lanchero*, making specific reference to the *patero*’s use of a small rowboat or motorboat, as opposed to *una balsa inflable* [an inflatable raft] or *cámaras de llanta* [inner tubes], which *pateros* also use. In this regard, it is worth noting that in Mexican Spanish, almost any flotation device can be referred to as a *pato* (migration scholar Jorge Bustamante, quoted in Garza Quirós 1993:124).

⁹ **English translation:** The term “patero” is applied on the Tamaulipas border to those who dedicate themselves to the illegal trafficking of persons across the Río Bravo, while in Tijuana and in Sonora these criminals are known as “polleros.” The use of the term “patero” could have its origin back in the first years of the 20th century, when audacious smugglers of liquor crossed their merchandise into the United States utilizing small launches made of wood and thick canvas known by the name “patos.”

¹⁰ **English translation:** A person that operates a “pato” or launch to take people across the river without paying the immigration tax. **Historical note from author:** In the early years of the 20th century, U.S. border agents collected a “head tax” on all foreign nationals entering the country from Mexico. These border agents were stationed at official ports of entry that could be avoided by crossing the Rio Grande away from official ports of entry. See García 1981:48; Reisler 1976:24; and Slayden 1921:122.

¹¹ **English translation:** A small launch made of canvas to take people across the Rio Grande without paying the immigration tax.

The term *patero* can also be used to refer to the builder of a *pato*, as evidenced in a 1993 article about the history and modern-day construction of such boats written by folklorist Fernando Garza Quirós. The *pato*, as Garza Quirós describes it, is “half boat, half raft.” It is made by cutting the branches of a tree that grows along the Río Bravo in Tamaulipas called the *yew-leaf willow* in English and *taray* or *hUILOTE* in Spanish (scientific name *Salix taxipholia* K.). These branches are nailed together to form the framework of the boat, around which is draped a canvas tarpaulin. The boats can be made quickly, in a matter of hours, at little to no cost with materials at hand, and can stay in the water for several hours without leaking, long enough for several trips back and forth across the river loaded with migrants or contraband. The *patos* can be propelled with oars, with human arms paddling in the water, with swimmers pulling it through the water, or pulled with lines from the opposite bank. According to Garza Quirós, along some stretches of the Mexican side of the river, *patos* could be found stashed in many places in the brush along the bank and all the local residents knew who their owners were. The principal use of the *patos* at the time Garza Quirós was writing was to take people and objects across the river without having to consult with government authorities about who or what was being transported. As one of the boat-builders (*pateros*) interviewed by the author put it, “Making *los patos* is a way of life that injures authority” (Garza Quirós 1993:124).

Those of us who study international migration for a living may wonder about a possible relationship between the Mexican term *patero* and the Spanish term *patera*, which refers to the boats used to transport African migrants to Spain, either across the Straits of Gibraltar or to the Canary Islands (see Europapress 2005 and Larousse Editorial, S.A. 1998: 1293). Larousse’s *Gran diccionario usual de la lengua española* (1998:1293) defines *patera* as “una barca de fondo muy plano que se utiliza en la caza del pato en aguas de poco calado.”¹² Philologist Marco Kunz (2005) has investigated the possible relationship between these two regionally-specific terms in the Spanish-language lexicon of migration. He notes that, unlike the term “*pato*” on the Río Grande/Río Bravo, the term “*patera*” in Spain has today become generalized to refer to “cualquier tipo de barca pequeña, lancha o balsa utilizada para cruzar el mar entre Marruecos y la Península Ibérica o las Islas Canarias.”¹³

Kunz observes that several terms have been used to refer to the people who can be found aboard *pateras* travelling from North Africa to Spain. The most common is *paterista*, which quite

¹² **English translation:** A small boat with a very flat bottom that is used in duck-hunting in shallow waters.

¹³ **English translation:** Any type of small boat, launch, or raft utilized to cross the sea between Morocco and the Iberian Peninsula or the Canary Islands.

confusingly can refer either to the migrant passengers aboard these vessels or to their pilots. A second term used in peninsular Spanish for the men operating pateras is *patereros*. Unlike *paterista*, this term is not generally used to designate the migrant passengers aboard pateras. A third term that Kunz reports as having been used in Spain to refer to the pilots of pateras is, perhaps unsurprisingly, *patero*. Rather than seeing *patero* as an irregular derivation of *patera*, he convincingly argues that this term appears to have arrived in Spain from Mexico, mainly because pateras did not become known for their use in ferrying migrants into Europe until around twenty years ago. In addition, he notes that this has occurred with other Mexican terms related to migration:

Como en México el cruce ilegal de la frontera estadounidense tiene una tradición mucho más larga que la inmigración a España, existe allí ... un léxico de base hispánica más arraigado que el de la Península No extraña que algunos de los términos mexicanos hayan empezado a aparecer también en la prensa española, como *espaldas mojadas y mojados* para denominar a los inmigrantes por el hecho de tener que atravesar el Río Grande o el mar, respectivamente (Kunz 2005).¹⁴

In addition, Kunz (2005) argues that it is not believable that the Mexican term *patero* is in any way derived from the peninsular *patera*:

Si el *patero* mexicano fuera realmente un derivado de *patera* en el sentido de ‘pasador de inmigrantes ilegales’, ‘jefe de patera’, no habría podido aparecer en México antes de los últimos años del siglo XX, porque, como ya hemos visto, *patera*, palabra desconocida en América en la acepción ‘embarcación’, era hasta los años 80, cuando empezó a divulgarse en la prensa peninsular, un dialectalismo andaluz que designaba principalmente un barco muy plano destinado a la caza de patos en aguas de poco calado, y que en la primera mitad del siglo XX seguramente no se asociaba en absoluto con la inmigración clandestina de africanos, por el simple hecho de que ésta no existía.¹⁵

Another possible derivation of *patero*, according to Kunz, is based on the fact that pateros “se dedican a contrabandear personas a Estados Unidos sobre llantas infladas, que empujan patealeando como patos.”¹⁶ The source of this speculation is a series of Pulitzer Prize winning news stories by

¹⁴ **English translation:** Given that in Mexico there is a much longer tradition of illegal crossing of the U.S. border than there is of immigration to Spain, it has ... a much more rooted Hispanic-based lexicon than on the Peninsula It is not surprising that some Mexican terms have begun to appear in the Spanish press, like “wetbacks” and “wets” to refer to immigrants who have had to cross the Rio Grande or the sea, respectively.

¹⁵ **English translation:** If the Mexican *patero* were really a derivation of *patera* in the sense of ‘smuggler of illegal immigrants,’ ‘patera boss,’ it couldn’t have appeared in Mexico before the last years of the 20th century, since, as we have already seen, *patera* was unknown in the Americas in the sense of a kind of boat. It was not until the 1980s when this term began to be used by the Peninsular press, an Andalusian dialectical term that referred mainly to a shallow-draught boat used for duck hunting in shallow waters, and that, in the first half of the 20th century, was not associated in any way with the clandestine immigration of Africans, for the simple reason that this migration did not exist.

¹⁶ **English translation:** They dedicate themselves to smuggling persons into the United States on inner tubes that they push by paddling like ducks.

reporter Sonia Nazario that appeared in *The Los Angeles Times* and was later published as the book *Enrique's Journey* (Nazario 2006).

Regardless of its etymology, the use of the term *patero* in Mexico and the United States is restricted to the Northeast Mexico-South Texas border and is seldom heard elsewhere. Interestingly, the term *patero*, which is the least common folkloric term for a facilitator of undocumented migration among Mexicans, is the only folkloric Mexican term with this meaning that has been adopted in Spain (Kunz 2005). There also exists a derivation of *patero* that designates as *paterismo* the activity in which *pateros* engage. *Paterismo* is sometimes used in the northeastern Mexican press (see Monge 2006; Notimex 1998; and Pérez Galindo 1998), and though Kunz (2005) did not find it being used in the peninsular Spanish press, he did identify some uses of the term in the press in the Canary Islands. Unlike the peninsular use of the term *patero*, however, he regarded *paterismo* as being a direct derivation of *patera*.

Polleros

The term *pollero* has its origins west of El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, where migrants make a land crossing of the border and are referred to by their hired guides as *pollos* (“chickens”). Hence the person who transports *pollos* is a *pollero* (literally, a “chicken man” or “chicken grower/seller”).¹⁷ Unlike the other regional term *patero*, whose use has remained restricted, use of the term *pollero*, is increasingly used by the Mexican press to refer generically to the transporters of unauthorized migrants wherever they are found, including and especially in the interior of Mexico and on its southern border with Guatemala, where their clients are mainly Central Americans (see, for example, El Sol de Irapuato 2005; Liñan 2003; and Romero 2004). In this usage, *polleros* are typically presented as members of organized criminal bands that, like drug cartels, represent a threat to public security within Mexico. One of the potential reasons for the growing use of *pollero* as a generic term for facilitators of undocumented migration from Mexico is the dramatic shift in the flow of migrants away from Texas since the launching of the Border Patrol’s Operation Blockade in 1993 and Operation Rio Grande in 1997 (Spener in press). Today the single largest autonomous migratory flow bisecting the border passes through Sonora and Arizona, which involves no river crossing and is a region where *pollero* has traditionally been used. The Grupo Beta agent I interviewed in Matamoros, who had also worked in Sonora, had this to say about the regional variation and other terms derived from thinking of migrants as *pollos*:

¹⁷ In Spain and other Latin American countries such as Venezuela, a *pollero* is a grower and/or seller of chicken. See for example, Radio Granada 2008.

En el área donde estuve trabajando en Sonora donde no hay río, nunca escuchabas de un ‘patero’ porque allá se habla de ‘polleros,’ incluso todo el lenguaje coloquial que utilizan alrededor. Por ejemplo, los lugares donde los acuestan les dicen ‘nidos’. O les dicen ‘gallineros’. Allá en la región donde estuve. Porque eran ‘pollitos’ los que cruzaban con ellos.¹⁸

This agent also explained to me why she tried to avoid using the colloquial terms *pollero* and *patero* to refer to migration facilitators and instead tried to make exclusive use of the legal term *traficante*. This was in keeping with official policy of Grupo Beta as an agency of the Mexican government. Moreover, she felt using the term *traficante* was more respectful toward the migrants it was her duty to protect:

A nosotros, iniciando el trabajo, la autoridad central nos dijo que procuráramos no usar el término ‘polleros’. El término legal, que el término correcto era ‘traficantes’. ... Porque es muy ofensivo a una persona por más que su necesidad de trabajo le lleve a ser cruzado en forma ilegal, en forma indocumentada, que a esta persona decirle ‘pollo’ o ‘pato’ pues, ¡es una persona! Es peyorativo. Pero en realidad la actividad te va involucrando hasta que hablar de un traficante es lo mismo que hablar de un pollero, ¿verdad?¹⁹

Kunz (2005) cites legendary Tijuana newspaperman J. Jesús Blancornelas as relating an anecdote of the supposed first instance of referring to Mexican migrants as *pollos*. According to Blancornelas, Mexican customs agents in Tijuana in 1963 found some chickens under the hood of a smuggler’s car that had been *chamuscados* [scorched] by the heat of the motor. A couple of years later, a long-bedded pick-up truck passed through the same checkpoint on the way into the United States. On the U.S. side, an agent inspected the vehicle and discovered it had a false bottom (*un doble fondo*). He found ten Mexican men crammed into the space under the bed of the truck. The Immigration and Naturalization Service did not let the men out of the space and called journalists from both sides of the border, who photographed the frustrated migrants packed into the hidden compartment the inspection had revealed. Someone who had seen the burnt chickens on the Mexican

¹⁸**English translation:** In the area where I was working in Arizona, where there’s no river, we never heard anything about a “patero,” because over there they talk about “polleros.” That includes all the colloquial language revolving around the term. For example, they call the places where they bed them down for the night “nests” or “chicken coops.” Out there where I was. Because they were “chicks” that they were bringing across.

¹⁹**English translation:** When we started working, headquarters told us to try not to use the term *polleros*. The legal term, the correct term was *traficantes*. ... Because it is very offensive to call a person, who because of his need has to be taken across illegally, as an undocumented, to call this person “chicken” or “duck.” Look, it’s a person! It’s pejorative. But in reality, you get into it, to the point where saying *traficante* is the same as saying *pollero*, right?
Note from author: Of course, the term *traficante* itself, like *contrabandista* or its English equivalent *smuggler*, could be interpreted as denigrating towards migrants as well, to the extent that it reduces people to the status of inanimate objects that are trucked and bartered by others.

side two years earlier said, “They look like those chickens!” Supposedly *indocumentados* have been referred to as *pollos* ever since and the people who guide and transport them as *polleros* (Blancornelas 2000, cited in Kunz 2005). Concomitantly, *pollerismo* is the colloquial Mexican term used to designate the activities carried out by *polleros* (see, for example Acosta G. 2007; El Imparcial 2008; and Kunz 2005).

Coyotes

Although the use of the term *pollero* in the discourse about border-crossing is growing, *coyote* undoubtedly remains the colloquial term most widely used by Mexicans to refer to those who facilitate the clandestine passage of migrants across the border. Its use with regard to migration dates back until at least the 1920s, when Gamio (1930:204-207) discussed the activities of coyotes in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso area. As Kunz (2005) notes, *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang* (Green 2005:344) dates the colloquial use of coyote in U.S. English to the 1920s, suggesting its earlier use in Mexican Spanish. The earliest use of coyote with reference to Mexican clandestine border-crossing that I have encountered appears in an interview conducted by one of Gamio’s research assistants of a woman in San Antonio, Texas who in 1919 had entered the United States at Laredo with the assistance of a man she referred to as a coyote, who rowed her and several other people across the Río Bravo in a small boat (Weber, Melville, and Palerm 2002:185-186). Unlike *patero* and *pollero*, the use of *coyote* is not specific to any particular stretch of the border or any single region in the Mexican interior. In spite of the fact that my own field research has focused on clandestine crossings of the South Texas-Northeast Mexico border where the term *patero* originates, nearly all of my Mexican-migrant informants who crossed that stretch of the border spoke of *coyotes* rather than *pateros*, and few informants referred to the guides and transporters of migrants as *polleros* unless prompted to do so during the interview.

In contemporary Mexico, the term *coyote* has taken on several broad colloquial meanings apart from its literal definition. Three of these meanings are relevant to analyzing the migration of Mexicans to the United States. The first colloquial definition of a coyote refers to a person hired to help his or her client evade bureaucratic regulations of some kind. The second refers to the “middleman” role played in the marketing and distribution of a commodity, especially an agricultural commodity. The third refers to a guide hired by clandestine migrants to cross the border. Each of these colloquial uses of the term coyote is diffused widely throughout the country. Although only the third colloquial use is typically understood as relating directly to the migration process, the first two uses are not only applicable to Mexican migration to the United States but have also played an important role in facilitating it both historically and in the contemporary period.

Coyotes as experts at evading bureaucratic regulations

The word coyote is most widely used colloquially in Mexico to refer to a person who is employed by someone else to help her/him evade or fulfill, by illicit means, some legal-bureaucratic requirement imposed on her/him by the government. Thus, *El diccionario breve de mexicanismos* defines a coyote as an “intermediario ilegítimo de trámites burocráticos” [an illegitimate intermediary of bureaucratic procedures] (Gómez de Silva 2001). I was reminded of this meaning of coyote by the Mexican consular official quoted previously. Her explanation was as follows:

La palabra coyote en México es la persona que facilita la gestión por fuera de las disposiciones legales, que igual para poder obtener el permiso para un carro, la licencia de manejo. Si yo quiero sacar la licencia para algo pero no reúno los requisitos, yo voy con un coyote que me va a facilitar mi paso por la burocracia. En México, fuera de la frontera se usa el término ‘coyote’ para esto principalmente. El coyotaje en México tiene este sentido de evadir estas cuestiones de trámites administrativos.²⁰

The *Enciclopedia de México* offers a more complete description of what a coyote does in its definition of the verb *coyotear*:

Ejercer, en cualquier tipo de negocio, la ocupación de intermediario para abreviar trámites, superar escollos legales o evitar molestias burocráticas. El ‘coyote’ actúa siempre en los imprecisos límites entre lo legal y lo ilegal. Los coyotes resuelven problemas administrativos en relación con oficinas del gobierno, o bien gestionan la favorable solución de asuntos judiciales y policíacos, todo ello mediante pago de una cantidad fija o de un porcentaje sobre el monto de la operación. A menudo son simples conductos en la práctica del cohecho (Álvarez 1987:1873).²¹

Employing coyotes is part of everyday life in much of Mexico, as it has been elsewhere in Latin America, where burdensome requirements for documentation imposed by sluggish state bureaucracies can result in lengthy delays in gaining access to even the most basic services (see de Soto 1989). Thus, although the person employing a coyote may not feel that doing so is entirely proper, he is unlikely to think of doing so as immoral or criminal, either, and may, in fact, be quite

²⁰ **English translation:** The word coyote in Mexico is the person who facilitates getting something for you without going through all the legal procedures, whether it’s getting a car permit or a driver’s license. If I want to get a permit for something but I don’t fulfill the requirements, I go to a coyote, who is going to ease my way through the bureaucracy. In Mexico, away from the border, the term coyote is used mainly for this. *Coyotaje* in Mexico has this meaning of evading these questions of bureaucratic procedures.

²¹ **English translation:** To play the role, in any type of business, of an intermediary in order cut red tape, get around legal obstacles, or avoid bureaucratic hassles. The ‘coyote’ always operates along the imprecise boundaries between the legal and illegal. Coyotes resolve administrative problems with regard to government offices or arrange favorable outcomes in the courts or with the police, all by means of the payment of a fixed amount of money or a percentage of the profit from the deal. Often it consists simply of getting the bribe to the proper official. **Note from author:** Former Mexican newspaper columnist David Peña-Alfaro notes that in contemporary Mexican Spanish, *coyotear* can also mean to hustle someone, as in the case of the man who is an expert pool-player but pretends to be an amateur in order to win money from his unsuspecting opponent (personal communication, April 9, 2007).

appreciative of the coyote's ability to help him deal with the onerous procedures imposed on him by what he considers to be an inefficient and adversarial bureaucracy. At the same time, he is likely to view the coyote as a slippery and devious character, quite in accordance with the cultural mythology surrounding him, no matter how valuable the services he provides (see Meléndez 1982). This is conveyed vividly in an article published in 2005 by the Mexico City newspaper *El Universal*, describing the coyotes that operate these days at the motor vehicles department there:

Los antiguos *coyotes*, de lentes negros, trajes de rayas, camisas negras y corbatas de colores chillantes ya no existen como tales. Ya no interceptan clientes en la entrada y ahora se van a un café y de ahí coordinan por celular todas sus *movidas*, sobre todo, en Control Vehicular, donde hacer un trámite de alta, baja o cambio de propietario es un martirio si no se cuentan con alguna *ayuda*. Los del mostrador ya no caen en la vulgaridad de pedir dinero, ahora *gestionan por celular*. Un ejemplo es la Cuauhtémoc, donde el *coyote* ya ni siquiera tiene que llegar con el *tambache* de papeles a una ventanilla, sino que los propios trabajadores salen a recoger la papelería.²²

The idea of a coyote as someone to help you evade regulation by or receive some sort of dispensation from the government dates back to Spanish colonial times. Eric Wolf, in his classic work of cultural anthropology *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (1959), noted that *coyotaje* had been an integral element of Mexican society in the colonial period, one that he linked to the racial and cultural mixing known as *mestizaje*. According to Wolf (1959:237), the intervention of coyotes became widespread in New Spain where “there was little correspondence between law and reality” and where the law existed primarily to defend “islands of legality and privilege.” He characterized the activities of coyotes as follows:

Royal prescript supported the trade monopoly over goods flowing in and out of the colony; but along the edges of the law moved smugglers, cattle-rustlers, bandits, the buyers and sellers of clandestine produce. To the blind eyes of the law, there arose a multitude of scribes, lawyers, go-betweens, influence peddlers, and undercover agents, the *coyotes* of modern Middle America, a term that once merely designated

²²**English translation:** The old-style coyotes, with their dark glasses, striped suits, black shirts and loud ties no longer exist as such. They no longer intercept clients at the entrance but now go to a café and coordinate all their *movidas* [shady deals] from there by cell phone, especially in *Control Vehicular* [motor vehicle licenses department], where obtaining or canceling a vehicle permit or transferring title means martyrdom if you don't have some sort of help. The employees at the counter no longer commit the vulgarity of asking for money, now they negotiate everything on the cell. One example is the *Delegación Cuauhtémoc* [Cuauhtémoc office], where the coyote doesn't even have to go to the window with the *tambache* [stack] of papers; instead the employees leave the office to pick up the paperwork [from the coyotes] **Author's note:** In this type of situation, the employees of the bureaucracy may in fact *deliberately* delay procedures in order to make the hiring of a coyote necessary so that they can collect bribes to supplement their meager salaries (personal communication with David Peña-Alfaro, April 9, 2007).

one of the physical types produced by mixed unions.²³ In such a society, even the transactions of everyday life could smack of illegality; yet such illegality was the stuff of which this social order was made. Illicit transactions demanded their agents; the army of the disinherited, deprived of alternative sources of employment, provided these agents (Wolf 1959:237).

Wolf went on to attribute to *mestizos* precisely those characteristics that today are attributed to coyotes:

Disinherited by society, the *mestizo* was also disinherited culturally. Deprived of a stable place in the social order, he could make only limited use of the heterogeneous cultural heritage left him by his varied ancestors. ... His chances of survival lay neither in accumulating cultural furniture nor in cleaving to cultural norms, but in an ability to change, to adapt, to improvise. The ever shifting nature of his social condition forced him to move with guile and speed through the hidden passageways of society, not to commit himself to any one position or to any one spot. Always he would be called upon to seem both more or less than what he was, to be both more or less than what he seemed (Wolf 1959:238).

A few pages later, he continued in the same vein, noting how “society abdicated to [the mestizos] its informal and unacknowledged business” making them “brokers and carriers of the multiple transactions that cause the blood to flow through the veins of the social organism,” such that “their fingers wove the network of social relations and communication through which alone men could bridge the gaps between formal institutions” (Wolf 1959:243).

Coyotes continued to play a significant role in Mexican society after independence in the 19th century. For example, the *Vocabulario de mexicanismos*, published in 1899, describes men called coyotes that entered prisons and told prisoners that in exchange for money they could get favorable dispensations for them from the judges assigned to their cases. The definition implied that these men were, in fact swindlers who preyed upon the desperation of prisoners, many of whom were imprisoned for debts they owed (García Izcabalceta 1899). This representation of coyotes as would-be swindlers who were as likely to cheat unwitting customers as to actually provide the services promised persists to the present day. A good example of this in the migration field are the coyotes who offer to help ineligible migrants get immigrant visas from U.S. authorities, when, in fact, the paperwork they process and claim to be legitimate is actually worthless for that purpose (see, for example, Marshall 2005).

²³Meléndez (1982:298-299) also discusses the use of this term to refer to mixed-race children in colonial and subsequent periods of Mexican history. Gamio (1930:233) notes that in the 1920s, “half-Mexicans and half-Americans” were called coyotes in Texas and New Mexico. Lamadrid (1995:18) notes that even today in New Mexico, “the term is still used to designate those persons who are half Hispanic and half Other, either Anglo American or Native American.”

Coyotes as “middlemen” in commodity chains

The term coyote is also used colloquially in Mexico to refer to a broker or “middleman,” especially with regard to agricultural commodities. As is usually the case in business, both north and south of the border, “middlemen” are not viewed kindly by either producers or consumers, even though they arguably provide a needed market service. Interviewed for an article about the commercial crisis facing coffee growers in Chiapas, a member of a coffee cooperative had this to say about coyotes who bought coffee from producers:

Manuel Gómez Ruiz es socio de la cooperativa Majomut. Cuenta las ventajas de la organización y la manera en que *los coyotes* (intermediarios) bajan el precio al productor: “Antes el café bajaba mucho. Pero siempre el precio que paga la cooperativa es mayor que el precio del coyote. Hemos luchado por vender el café en el comercio justo pero no hemos podido. Por lo menos en la Cooperativa conseguimos un mejor precio que si vendemos al *coyote*, por eso seguimos con la [la cooperativa]” (Carlsen and Cervantes 2004).²⁴

Numerous reports in the Mexican press describe the operation of coyote brokers in other agricultural commodities, including lumber, beans, corn, fresh vegetables, and shrimp (see, for example, González and Gómez 2007; Olea 1995; Sánchez Venegas 2007; Santos and Flores 2007; Vásquez 2002). In these reports, the term *coyote* is typically employed pejoratively. Another type of “broker” coyotes can be found operating in the informal economy in Mexico City. These coyotes act as a sort of street-side “pawnbrokers,” who buy the personal effects of working and lower class urban residents and subsequently re-sell them, thus giving their customers the opportunity to quickly raise urgently needed cash (Escobar Cardoso 2001). The idea of a coyote operating as an intermediary or broker is contemplated by two definitions offered by Santamaría (1983:309) in the *Diccionario de mejicanismos*. He offers this definition of *coyote* as a noun: “intermediario, en general, en toda clase de transacciones, operando por comisión o porcentaje, o participación” [intermediary, generally speaking, in any kind of transaction, operating on a commission, percentage, or share basis]. And for the verb form, *coyotear*, he offers the following: “ejercer el comercio transitoriamente en operaciones de cambio, descuento o venta de segunda mano” [to engage in trade in a transitory fashion, in operations involving exchange, discount, or second-hand sales]. A number of noun forms can be used to refer to the activities undertaken by coyotes, including *coyotaje* (Gómez de Silva 2001), *coyoteada*, *coyotería*, *coyoteo* (Santamaría 1983:309), and *coyotismo* (Kunz 2005). Of

²⁴ **English translation:** Manuel Gómez Ruiz is a member of the Majomut Coffee Cooperative. He tells of the advantages of the organization and how the coyotes (intermediaries) lower the price paid to the producer. “Before, the coffee price was lowered a lot. But the price paid by the cooperative is always higher than the coyote’s price. We’ve struggled to sell coffee using fair trade practices but we haven’t been able to. At least we get a better price selling to the cooperative than if we sell to the coyote. That’s why we stick with the [cooperative]”

these, *coyotaje* appears to be by far the most prevalent and is the term I use in my own work to refer to the assistance provided to undocumented Mexican migrants as they attempt to enter the United States (Spener 2005, 2008 and in press).

Coyotes as migration guides and facilitators

The term coyote has been used with regard to Mexican migration to the United States at least since the early years of the 20th century. Typically, a coyote is thought of as a person who surreptitiously guides undocumented migrants across the border into the United States away from the legal ports of entry where only those individuals whose legal papers are in order are allowed to enter (see, for example De Mente 1996:72-75). Coyotes do many more things to facilitate migrants' entry into the United States than just act as their guides. In fact, coyotes facilitate the entry of the United States by Mexican migrants in a variety of ways that we have already contemplated in the first two colloquial definitions of coyote as 1) someone who helps her client get around a legal-bureaucratic hurdle of some sort and 2) a broker of a desired good or service. For example, with regard to the first definition, coyotes both today and over most of the last century have provided documents to migrants, both real and counterfeit, that allow them to enter the United States to live and work. Indeed, we might well consider the coyote "guide" to be fulfilling this definition as well, since in the final analysis leading a migrant into the United States by bypassing the legal port of entry is a way of avoiding the legal-bureaucratic requirement of presenting his immigration papers for inspection by the authorities.

With regard to the second colloquial definition, since the late 19th century labor contractors working at the border or in the Mexican interior have effectively operated as coyotes by serving as brokers for U.S. employers seeking to hire Mexican workers who have not yet reached the United States interior. Although these brokers are not always referred to as coyotes, the historical record shows that at least some of the time they have gone by this name (Dobie 1948:198 and Meléndez 1982:296). Coyotes have provided this labor-brokerage service at times legally and at others quite illegally (Spener 2005 and in press). When they have engaged in legally proscribed activities—whether surreptitiously guiding migrants on foot across the border, providing them with fake documents, or paying off immigration officials to let them pass through the legal ports of entry—they have fulfilled both of the first two colloquial definitions simultaneously.

To summarize, we can think of coyotes' participation in facilitating Mexican migration to the United States as taking three basic forms, both historically and in the contemporary period, that correspond to the three colloquial Mexican uses of the term *coyote* discussed above. The first form consists of *bureaucratic evasion*, i.e., helping migrants overcome legal-bureaucratic obstacles

imposed by the state that might otherwise prevent their migration. The second form consists of *labor brokerage*, i.e., the recruitment, whether legal or illegal, of Mexican workers by U.S. employers through the use of hired intermediaries. The third form involves the provision of *clandestine border-crossing services*, where a migrant hires a coyote to help guide her into the United States away from the legal ports of entry and transport her away from the border towards her final destination in the interior of the country.

Who's in charge? The pasador, the patero, the pollero, or the coyote?

At this point it is worth noting that although the terms *pasador*, *patero*, *pollero*, and *coyote* are often used as synonyms for one another, not all my informants who lived along the South Texas-Northeast Mexico border regarded them as meaning the same thing. Moreover, different informants had differing opinions about exactly how the meaning of one term differed from another. These ambiguities and inconsistencies in usage appeared to derive in part from the fact that *coyotes/pasadores/pateros/polleros* along the border are often not individuals but rather are organizations or networks whose members carry out a variety of specific tasks.

The people who carry out these tasks are referred to by their colleagues using a variety of prosaic terms. Within such organizations on the Northeast Mexico-South Texas border today, we find *enganchadores* who recruit migrants in sending communities, upon their arrival at border city bus stations, and adjacent to international bridges over the Río Bravo del Norte, where migrants frequently congregate after having been apprehended and deported by U.S. immigration authorities.

Brincadores dedicate themselves to the “brinco” [hop] across the river, taking migrants across wading, swimming, on inner-tubes, or in small boats. Some *brincadores* have come upon their occupation by virtue of living directly on the riverbank, so their activity is an extension of their place of residence. In South Texas-Northeast Mexico, *brincadores* may be referred to by migrants as *pateros*, given their specialization in ferrying migrants across the river. If they take migrants across in boats, *brincadores* may also be referred to as *lancheros*.

Guías [guides], *mulas* [mules], or *encaminadores* [the ones who walk them] are the guides who lead groups of migrants on marches through the South Texas brush country as they attempt to circumvent Border Patrol checkpoints on the highways leading north, while *choferes* are the drivers of the vehicles used to transport migrants to Texas interior cities once they have evaded the Border Patrol. Other drivers who transport migrants between Texas destination cities and places in other parts of the United States, for a separate fee, are known as *raiteros*, derived from *raite*, the Hispanicization of English word *ride* (see also Hernández-León 2008:221, note 3).

Writing about the business of moving migrants across the border in Tijuana, Vásquez Mendoza (2001) reports that the recruiters for *polleros/coyotes* are referred to as *taloneros*, deriving from the word *talón*, meaning the heel of the foot or shoe, implying someone who is a hustler walking the streets. Other members of a band of coyotes or polleros there may include the *encargado* (person in charge of a safe house on the U.S. side of the border) and the *repartidor*, the person who splits up a load of migrants that has arrived in the United States, sending individual members of the group to their separate destinations in different parts of the country. Recent research about migration-facilitating operations in the Alta-Baja California and Arizona-Sonora corridors by Fuentes and García (2009) reported several other terms reflecting the hierarchical division of labor they found in some of these businesses.

Patrones [bosses] or *socios* [partners] administer the business and its finances, own the operation's lodging, vehicles, and other equipment, and manage relationships with government officials, including arranging bribes to law enforcement. Beneath the patrones are the *guías* or *coyotes*, who actually move migrants across the border and arrange their transportation to other points within the United States. Each coyote has one to three "assistants" under his direction whose job it is to keep migrants together and train to be full-fledged coyotes themselves. Working under the assistants were the *chequeadores* and *chequeadores pa'rriba*, who served as scouts or lookouts, letting the coyotes and their assistants know when the "coast was clear" for them to slip through the Border Patrol's defenses.²⁵ The *chequeadores*²⁶ worked directly along the border to monitor Border Patrol "line-watch" deployments. The *chequeadores pa'rriba* worked on the U.S. side, driving alone in vehicles ahead of the vehicles actually carrying migrants in order to be able to warn them of Border Patrol vehicles on the road. At the bottom of the hierarchy, Fuentes and García were told, were the *cuidanderos*,²⁷ who were young teenagers whose job it was to distract Border Patrol agents and remove the tire spikes placed on roads by agents to stop vehicles laden with migrants.

Recognizing the fact that migration facilitators are often, in fact, organizations rather than individuals seems to have promoted a sense among some border residents and migrants passing through the border region that the "real" pollero/patero/coyote is the person who is in charge of the

²⁵ The practice by organized bands of coyotes of using scouts and lookouts to monitor Border Patrol deployments dates back to the 1920s, when it was documented by Gamio (1930) in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso area.

²⁶ This derivation is unexpected, given that in Mexican Spanish, the Anglicization of "to check" is typically *checar* rather than *chequear*, which is used by South American Spanish speakers in countries such as Venezuela and Colombia. One would expect, therefore, would be *checador* rather than *chequeador*.

²⁷ This derivation is also somewhat surprising, given that the seemingly more likely construction for a noun meaning "el que cuida" would be *cuidador*. On the other hand, "el que cura" in Mexican Spanish is a *curandero*, so this type of construction is plausible.

organization containing the other positions described above. Not surprisingly, though, informants often use these terms inconsistently and idiosyncratically. For example, a Mexican businessperson in Brownsville who was knowledgeable about the practices of some of the organizations dedicated to bringing migrants across the border made the following distinctions between the terms *coyote* and *pollero*:

Me dicen ahora que ‘el pollero’ en Matamoros es el ‘high tech’ coyote. Para llamarle de alguna manera. ‘High tech’ ya tiene su ‘business’ establecido para pasar gente. Tiene sus Suburbans, tiene camionetas, tiene coyotes que trabajan para él. Yo voy al pollero y le digo ‘quiero llegar a Florida,’ y me dice “OK, le va a costar 1,500, 2,000, 3,000 dólares.” ... Pero él mismo no lo hace. Es el ‘empresario’ Él no lo hace pero tiene la red establecida para hacerlo. Él pone camionetas, él pone Suburbans, él pone celulares, él pone gente, él pone agua, él pone todo. Y tú le pagas a él y él te pone, a dónde tú lo estás contratando, y él le paga al coyote. Él es la cabeza del negocio, de la red. ¡Es un negociazo eso!²⁸

In a similar vein, the Matamoros-based Grupo Beta quoted above noted that the use of the term “coyote” connoted a certain level of sophistication and hierarchy that not all “traffickers” have. In this agent’s account, however, it is the *coyote* that heads the organization, not the *pollero*:

El término ‘traficante’ es el término legal. Es la persona que tipifican las leyes como quién está introduciendo la persona a otro país que es un sitio que no es el autorizado, ¿verdad? Es el traficante. De ahí se derivan todos los demás nombres. Para mí todos los demás nombres son sinónimos aún cuando hay quién dice el coyote es él que, dice que tiene una mayor jerarquía y del coyote dependen el patero, el pollero, el guía, el brincador. En este contexto yo creo que es un lenguaje que ellos van adecuando y que obviamente un guía o un brincador para ellos tiene menos jerarquía que un coyote que tiene el mando de la organización. A un coyote pueden depender muchas personas que están ayudándole a cruzar las personas. Pero para mí, a mi juicio, todos estos términos de coyote, patero, pollero, brincador y guía son sinónimos porque todos están cometiendo el delito, de alguna manera, la disposición del 138 [artículo de la Ley Federal de Población] y ya lo especifica, ¿no?²⁹

²⁸ **English translation:** They tell me now that the *pollero* in Matamoros is the “high tech” *coyote*. ... This “high tech” person has his business all set up to bring people across. He has his Suburbans, he has pick-up trucks, he has *coyotes* who work for him. I go to the *pollero* and I tell him I want to get to Florida, and he tells me, “Okay, it’s going to cost \$1,500, \$2,000, \$3,000.” ... But he himself doesn’t do it. He’s the “entrepreneur.” He doesn’t do it but he has the network set up to do it. He provides the pick-ups, he provides the Suburbans, he provides the cell phones, he provides the people, he provides the water, he provides everything. And you pay him and he sets you up with whoever he’s contracting and he pays the *coyote*. He’s the head of the business, of the network. It’s a big business!

²⁹ **English translation:** The term *traficante* is the legal term. This is the person typified in the law as someone who is introducing the person into another country in a site that is not authorized, right? That is the trafficker. From there all the other names are derived. For me, all the other names are synonymous even though some people say the *coyote* is the one, they say there’s more of a hierarchy and that the patero, the pollero, the guía and the brincador work for the coyote. In this context I believe it’s a language they’ve developed so that obviously a guía or a brincador for them has less of a hierarchy than a coyote, who is in charge of the organization. A coyote can be in charge of many people that are helping him to take people across. But for me, in my judgment, all these terms,

Writing about the situation prevailing in Tijuana in the 1970s, writer and journalist Sasha Gregory Lewis seconded the Grupo Beta agent's assessment that it was the coyote who ran the operation that transported migrants across the border. Beneath the coyote, in her account, worked the polleros, who recruited the "pollos" [migrants], the pasadores, who guided migrants across the border, the drop-house operators, who housed migrants, and the "mules," who worked as drivers for the operation.³⁰ According to Lewis, the coyote was the "big-time operator," whose identity was usually shielded from the other members of the network by a middleman (Lewis 1979:44-45).

In her research on emigration from the *mixteca poblana* [the Mixtec indigenous region in the state of Puebla], Liliana Rivera Sánchez (2003) found that members of the migrant communities there made another type of distinction between *polleros* and *coyotes*. In these communities, the pollero carried out the recruitment function for the network of associates that organized the clandestine transportation of people into the United States. The pollero took the migrants to a coyote at the border, who, in turn, spirited the migrants across the border and on to their ultimate destinations in the United States. More specifically, Rivera Sánchez (2003:3, note 9), defines pollero as follows:

[Polleros] son las personas que en sus comunidades de origen se dedican a juntar a los migrantes y entregarlos a los coyotes. Los polleros hacen enlaces muchas veces desde el sur y sureste del país hasta la frontera con los Estados Unidos y su contrato puede garantizar la llegada hacia ciudades en el norte de los Estados Unidos o bien, exclusivamente el cruce de la frontera. Esto es posible a redes de contacto en diversas ciudades norteamericanas.³¹

In contrast, Rivera Sánchez (2003:3, note 10) defines "coyote" as "el nombre que reciben las personas que se dedican a pasar ilegalmente a los migrantes en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México. El transporte del paso en la frontera es terrestre, pero después puede incluir algún vuelo interno, tren o autobús."³² In research comparing rural and urban emigration from the state of

coyote, patero, pollero, brincador and guía are synonyms because all of them are committing the crime, in some way, that is specified by article 38 of the Ley Federal de Población, right?

³⁰ Lewis did not offer Spanish names for "drop-house operators" or "mules" in her book, nor did she explain from whom she collected this information about the structure of the coyotes' business. The fact that she mistakenly uses *pasadore* as the singular for *pasadores*, as if it were, perhaps, a word in Italian instead of Spanish, suggests that we might want to take her terminology with a grain of salt.

³¹ **English translation:** Polleros are the people who, in their communities of origin, dedicate themselves to put groups of migrants together and deliver them to coyotes. The polleros establish links between the south and southeast of the country and the U.S. border and their contract may guarantee arrival in cities of the U.S. interior or only the border-crossing. This owes to networks of contacts in diverse U.S. cities.

³² **English translation:** The name given to persons who dedicate themselves to taking migrants illegally across the U.S.-Mexico border. Ground transport is used to get them across the border, but transport within the United States may include an internal flight or bus.

Morelos, Rivera Sánchez and Lozano (2006) identified the same distinction between the roles played by polleros and coyotes in the migration process. At the same time, they found that in some communities, the coyotes also carried out the recruiting task, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between coyotes and polleros (personal communication with Lozano, November 30, 2006). In these publications, Rivera Sánchez and Lozano do not specify whether it is the coyotes, the polleros, or someone else who direct the networks taking migrants to the United States.

Migrants in the state of Morelos who do not perceive a clear distinction between polleros and coyotes today do not seem to be alone in their position. Most of the migrants I interviewed who made their crossings along the Northeast Mexico-South Texas border did not make fine-grained distinctions among the possible terms they might use to refer to the people who helped them across the border. Most of the people I interviewed seemed to think of any such helper simply as a coyote, though some recognized pateros as a separate category if they had made a trip on which they themselves had directly hired one to get across the Río Bravo. Julián, a veteran migrant I interviewed in rural northern Guanajuato in early 2006 is a good example of this indifference to the possible distinctions implied by the terms discussed in this paper:

Spener: Acabas de usar la palabra *polleros*. ¿Aquí se usa esa palabra o son puros coyotes en esta zona?

Julián: No, aquí casi la mayoría es coyote.

Spener: ¿Y pateros? ¿También hablan de pateros aquí?

Julián: No, tampoco. Puros coyotes.

Spener: ¿Y quienes serán los polleros? ¿Es lo mismo o quiere decir otra cosa para ti?

Julián: Pues según yo, esa palabra que oí, pues yo la he oído mucho en Estados Unidos. De pollero casi la mayoría en la tele y en la radio he escuchado yo eso.

Spener: ¿Y las amistades allá hablan de polleros también?

Julián: No son puros coyotes.

Spener: ¿Y quienes serán los polleros entonces?

Julián: Los polleros son lo mismo que los coyotes.³³

The varied connotations, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in the ways in which Chicanos and Mexicans speak about migration facilitators demonstrate that, as scholars, we need to exercise great care in analyzing published texts and transcripts of interviews that discuss

³³ **English translation:** Spener: You just used the word *polleros*. Do people use that word around here or are they pure coyotes in this area? Julián: No, around here it's almost all *coyote*. Spener: What about pateros? Do they also talk about *pateros* here? Julián: No, just coyotes. Spener: Then who would the polleros be? Is it the same or does that mean something different to you? Julián: Well, if you ask me, I've heard that word. I heard it a lot in the United States. Most of the time on TV and the radio I heard them use pollero. Spener: And your friends there, did they talk about polleros, too? Julián: No, just coyotes. Spener: And who would the polleros be then? Julián: The polleros are the same as the coyotes.

clandestine-border crossing. It is fitting that the terms used in the vernacular discourse about this clandestine activity are no more effectively regulated by the linguistic authorities than the activity itself is regulated by the legal authorities.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to document and clarify the origins of a variety of terms in the lexicon associated with the practice of clandestine border-crossing on the Mexican border with the United States. My purpose in doing so is to lay the groundwork for more exhaustive attempts in the future to systematize and analyze the vernacular Spanish discourse about Mexican migration to the United States with relation to its official counterpart in English. Evidently, this paper represents only a very preliminary effort in this regard, with many other terms to be explored. These include the Spanish terms and Anglicisms having to do with the documents needed to cross the border, the names given by migrants to immigration agents, labor contractors, and U.S. occupations, as well as the ways in which migrants characterize the conditions of their crossings. In addition to inventorying the terms, we will need to engage in deeper analysis of their origins, contexts, and the way in which they assign meanings to the lived experience of migration. We must undertake this important linguistic investigation if we wish to properly interpret the ethnographic record of clandestine border crossing.

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