

## UC Irvine

### UC Irvine Previously Published Works

**Title**

"La Bestia"

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8ns0c53z>

**Author**

Rumbaut, RG

**Publication Date**

2014

Peer reviewed

# “La Bestia”

Guadalajara, 29 de marzo, 2014 – Rubén G. Rumbaut

(imágenes de encuentros con migrantes de Honduras, El Salvador y Guatemala, viajando quizás 1,500 millas encima de trenes de carga (“La Bestia,” también llamado el “tren de la muerte” por los muchos peligros del viaje), quienes se tiran del tren al pasar por Guadalajara para descansar un poco, pedir limosnas y comida, y luego montarse de nuevo y seguir rumbo a la frontera del norte)



Guadalajara, Mexico

Accompanied by Enrique Martínez Curiel, a locally-based Mexican anthropologist (with whom I am collaborating on a binational research project on related migration themes), we drove to a *colonia* in Guadalajara where the freight trains slow down as they go by, which is where some of the migrants traveling atop those trains often jump off to rest for a couple of days, get some sleep by a wall adjacent to the tracks (a row of homeless men), and beg in corners for food or pesos, before jumping back on a passing train en route to any of the U.S. border stops, like Tijuana, Mexicali, or Nogales, AZ. They can tell which train goes to the border (if the front of the locomotive is marked “FerroMex”), and the particular destination by the numbers on the train.

Right away on the other side of the track we spotted a couple of men, and called them over where we parked so that we could speak with them...



The two men were from Honduras. Their speech was sprinkled with characteristic Honduran phrases. The one on the left, in a red shirt, was 28 years old. He had made the trip before, had gotten to the U.S., but was picked up by ICE and deported. He had fallen off the train once, resulting in his left hand being severed by the train. The younger one at right was 17 years old, and this was his first trip north. Both were traveling together, and were trying to make it to Nashville, Tennessee. Apparently they have a contact there, and the expectation of getting work. Their plan (if you can call it that) was to travel on top of the freight trains to Tijuana, somehow cross into the U.S., and then make their way all the way to the other side of the continent, to Nashville. They had little realistic sense of the enormity of what laid ahead. They've already traveled atop La Bestia from Honduras up via Veracruz and Tabasco, and west to Guadalajara; now they will go north to Tijuana, cross a heavily militarized border full of narcos and drones and dangerous desert terrain, then make a hard right to cross an entire continent to... Tennessee?!



We gave them some money and they went on their way... As I looked at them walk away along the railroad tracks with their *mochilas* on their backs, wondering what would become of them, I noticed eerily the large billboard between them, depicting a well-dressed middle-class young man, also carrying some sort of bag on his shoulder, staring ahead in the middle of a well-paved super highway, as if pondering his future. Two radically different futures, the risky one of the flesh and blood men in front of us, evidently motivated by the urgency of desperation (to the point of risking an amputation), and the beckoning one rhapsodized in the billboard, seeming to suggest that education and ambition will take you wherever you want to go (along secure roads at that)...



A few blocks away we chanced upon Osvaldo, a 20 year old young man from Guatemala. It was hard not to feel supremely sorry for this young man, the same age as my son. He came across as demoralized, dismayed, bereft, depressed, drifting, rudderless... and for good reason. He had left three weeks before from Guatemala with two companions; their plan was to cross through Nogales, Arizona, and from there go on to... Minnesota. Why Minnesota?, I asked him. He said he'd heard there was work there (though he seemed to have no idea where Minnesota was... let alone how cold it was). But two days ago his companions "se perdieron" ("got lost") – though our interpretation was that they had abandoned him and left without him. Meantime Osvaldo had been assaulted, beaten, and robbed by local Mexican police (who warned him not to say anything to anyone). "Lo que mis ojos han visto..." he mumbled ("what my eyes have seen..."). He never imagined this, he said. He felt he now had to go back to Guatemala, but feared either alternative: get back on the train alone, or let the Mexican police pick him up (knowing he'd be jailed for months, in poor condition, before being put on a bus and deported).





Oswaldo, 20, from Guatemala



Soon after leaving Osvaldo with some money, hoping he'd get something substantial to eat and wishing him well (and telling him to be careful and hide the money well), we came across these two men, who approached us by our car windows when we stopped on the street. We told them to cross the street and meet us at the gas station there, where we could park the car and talk...



The two were traveling companions atop of *La Bestia*, having arrived just the night before in Guadalajara. The fellow on the left, Leonel, is 27 years old (will be 28 next month), and comes from Honduras, from where he had left *three weeks* before.

The one on the right, in a red shirt, is Vladimir, 28, from El Salvador. He had met Leonel on the train recently, though he himself had left from El Salvador *three months* before... and his has already been quite an odyssey (note his crutches)...

Each had been previously deported by ICE; each was trying again.



Leonel, wearing a New York Yankees cap and a Force 2 U t-shirt, told us that he was deported last year from Arizona, where he had gone to work. He was detained by ICE [the American Gestapo, as Doug Massey referred to it in a recent email], and held in the Val Verde Correctional Facility in Texas for five months before being deported to Honduras. Leonel has a daughter in Honduras, where there is no work to be found, so he's taking the ratcheted-up risk of reentry for the chance of finding paid employment and remittances to send to his daughter back home. He and Vladimir were hoping to enter the U.S. via Mexicali. Other than that he has no clear idea of what to do or where to go... he'll be playing it by ear once he gets to Mexicali.



But Vladimir's story is very different from Leonel's: He has a 10-year-old son in New York City. He was detained by ICE for six months in a jail in Manhattan, then taken by plane from Manhattan to Indianapolis, then to Texas, and finally deported to El Salvador. Wanting to be reunited with his son in New York, he got aboard La Bestia three months ago, but near Veracruz when it started to rain hard his hands slipped from a wet rail he was hanging on to and he was sucked under the train, which dragged him for some 300 meters, severing his left leg (and breaking his front teeth). He was rescued and taken to a clinic, where his leg was amputated and he was given the crutches he has. After a while he hopped on the train again, crutches and all... and here he is now...



They will rest here a while and then continue on to the northern border by Mexicali...





Before leaving, I asked Vladimir if he had been able to tell his family what happened to him. He looked down painfully, and said that he hadn't, *que le daba pena*, that he was ashamed for them to know what happened to him... it somehow represented a dismal failure, and he just could not bring himself to let them know. He just *had* to make it to the U.S. and see his son first...

Just a block away from where we said goodbye to Leonel and Vladimir we bumped into a young man named Marco, 19, also from Honduras, who has already gone through more things in his young life than even Candide himself (with apologies to Voltaire). He looked older than his years. While he was talking with us he was crafting something with some palm fronds he held in his hands, along with a kid's pair of scissors... and in a matter of minutes, while still talking, he had managed expertly to form a beautiful rose made out of palm fronds... the guy is very talented.



Marco, despite his young age, already has two babies in Honduras, born when he was 16 and 17. In search of work and money to support his kids, which could not be found in Honduras, he had already made two attempts to cross into the United States. The one time he made it all the way to the Sonoran desert in Arizona, he got lost and would have died if not for a pro-immigrant group that rescued him and took him back to the border and into Mexico. The second time he had been strafed with bullets, he said, from a plane or something like a plane, by the border. But getting there he had gone through worse: in the state of Tabasco (just past Veracruz), when he was riding La Bestia, he and another companion had been kidnapped by Zetas (an infamously violent cartel), and had been forced to do slave labor for them for weeks. He had to do work like cut down marijuana plants, etc. After several weeks of this, the Zetas gave him a little money and let him go. But now he had stopped in Guadalajara, and felt that he had no good option: trying to cross into the U.S., given what he knows and had gone through, was too dangerous and costly -- mission impossible. But going back to Honduras was not an option either: he had to support his kids.

His provisional solution: to stay in Guadalajara (where he has now been for a month and a half) and try to make some money and send remittances to Honduras from here. When I found out that his surname was Ramos, I told him, oh, like the ramos de palma he works with, and the Domingo de Ramos that was just a couple of Sundays away... He smiled broadly, and ran to get me something: a grasshopper figure he's made with the fronds, like the rose he made for Irene:



Enrique, my anthropologist friend, knew of a church nearby that would be perfect for him to sell his palm wares on Palm Sunday, April 13... in the parish of San Antonio de Padua... giving him a little over two weeks to get to work and have his stuff ready by then. When Marco left us he seemed inspired... and he might have inspired us a bit as well. It will be hard to forget him.



p.s.

If you don't know much about "La Bestia," listen to or view the enlightening presentations in the 2 links below (especially the NPR interview with Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martínez about "**Riding 'The Beast,'**" and the talk by Sonia Nazario (Pulitzer-prize winning journalist) about "**Enrique's Journey**" (at a 2013 Conference):

(1)

This 28-minute NPR interview is highly recommended:

### **Riding 'The Beast': Interview with Salvadoran Journalist Oscar Martínez**

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/latino/2013/10/24/234689752/riding-the-beast-guest-dj-with-salvadoran-journalist-oscar-martinez>

Audio in English:

<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=234689752&m=240495364>

Audio in Spanish:

<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=234689752&m=240547344>



IXTEPEC, MEXICO — Thousands of Central American migrants ride trains known as La Bestia (the beast) during their long and perilous journeys north through Mexico to the U.S. border. (This photo was taken aboard La Bestia in Ixtepec, along southern Mexico en route to Veracruz.)

(2)

### **Crossing Borders: Immigration and Gender in the Americas**

**Enrique's Journey:** Opening talk by **Sonia Nazario**, Pulitzer Prize-winning Journalist and Author of the national best seller, *Enrique's Journey*

(her talk starts after 12 minute mark, following intros to the conference by Dean Liz Cohen and Harvard Sociology Professor Mary Waters):