

Two Women, Two Journeys, One Border: Stories From the Migrant Generation

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The early twentieth century brought dramatic political, social, and economic changes to the United States and Mexico. In the U.S., increased industrialization and employment opportunities provided a pull for immigrants from Mexico. In Mexico, the 1910 Revolution marked the beginning of a new era and reawakened an imagination for political change. Its repercussions provided an impetus for many Mexicans to leave Mexico. For Mexican and Mexican American women, these events were inseparable from their own lives and aspirations.

Nearly a million Mexicans, documented and undocumented, immigrated to the United States during the *revolucion*.¹ Historian Rodolfo Alvarez called the participants of this exodus and relocation - the Migrant Generation.² Nearly half were women who travelled with their families to “el Norte.” (the North/United States) Among the reasons for their departure were 1) government corruption, 2) the violence of the revolution, 3) a socio-economically stratified society, and 4) seizure of lands.³ Some were intellectuals and political activists. Others were *soldaderas* (female soldiers), who fought with their husbands or alone. Most, however, were everyday domestics who not only struggled to survive, but were overwhelmed with the turmoil of the revolution and affected by formidable gender and socio-economic class barriers. Generally, Mexican women, especially poor Mexican women, were regarded as second-class citizens. In the United States, Mexican American women fared little better, facing poverty and ethnic and gender discrimination.

Collectively, their struggles are under documented or omitted, and not by accident. Despite immigrating from poverty to poverty, these Mexicanas became agents of change. They are the grandmothers and great grandmothers of the Mexican American, Chicana, and Latinx Generations, and their stories contribute to the historical tapestry of South Texas. This essay is about two everyday women – one born in Mexico and one in the United States - who mirrored the experience of thousands of others. Maura Lopez Gonzalez was Mexican by birth and American by life. Antonia Medrano Garcia was American by birth and “Mexican” by life. Both were interviewees for the Los del Valle Oral History Project, and both interviews were conducted in Spanish. Their first-person recollections are threads in the oral history memory of this place we call *el valle*.

Maura was born on November 21, 1898, in Nueva de Angeles, Zacatecas, into extreme poverty. She remembered, “Mi papa se llamaba Juan Gonzalez y mi mama se llamaba Maria Puentes de Gonzalez...Tuve muchos hermanos...Pue mi hermana, la mayor se llamaba, se llama todavia, Martina, Martina Gonzalez y mi hermano se llamaba Espiridion Gonzalez y otra hermana que se llamaba Carmen ...y Antonia...y otro hermano que se llamaba Alfredo... y otro hermano que se llama...Jose Angel Gonzalez. Esos son todos mis hermanos y mis hermanas...Llegamos a vivir en Guadalupe de Zacatecas, un pueblito que esta una llegua de Zacatecas... ahi vivimos nosotros.”

(My father was Juan Gonzalez, and my mother was Maria Puentes Gonzalez...I had many brothers {and sisters) ... Well, my sister, my oldest, was named, is still named Martina, Martina Gonzalez, and my brother was

named Espiridion Gonzalez, and my other sister was named Carmen...and Antonia...and another brother who was named Alfredo... and another brother named Jose Angel Gonzalez. Those are all my brothers and sisters... We came to live at Guadalupe Zacatecas, a small town that is a league from Zacatecas...That's where we lived.)⁴

Gonzalez recalled living and working on a hacienda when she saw her first automobile, "Cuando era joven, nuestra familia se movio a la hacienda Las Yescas, cerca del pueblo de Guadalupe...En ese tiempo, a mayoria de la gente viajaba por guayin. Nuestro hacendado compro un automovil, uno de los primero que vi. Tenia ocho o nueve anos. Asusto a los trabajadores. Un muchacho corrio, se trompezo y despues, camino con un manco. Algunas personas dijeron que el auto era el diablo porque tenia fuego en los ojos (faroles). No mas me rei porque habia visto uno antes en el pueblo con gente dentro del." (When I was young, our family moved to la hacienda Las Yescas, near the town of Guadalupe. Then, most people travelled by wagon. Our hacendado bought an automobile, one of the first I had ever seen. I was eight or nine. It frightened the workers. A boy ran away from it, tripped, fell, and walked with a limp afterward. Some people said the car was the devil because it had fire in its eyes (headlights)... I just laughed because I had seen one earlier in town with people riding in it).⁵

Her life changed substantially when she was only eleven. Then, it was not uncommon for a mother from a wealthy family to ask a mother from a poor family to allow her daughter to live with them in exchange for doing housework and caring for children. The girl was provided for, and her family's economic burden was lessened. However, being away from the family was not easy. Lopez remembered, "Una mujer que conocia a mi mama le si me prestaba para ayuudarla. En tonces, empeze a trabajar. Unos dos anos despues, empeze a trabajar con Carmen Perez; despues, para Herminda Lopez, la suegra de Carmen... Deje el trabajo alli cuando empezo la revolucion, y cuando los soldados de Pancho Villa se acercaron a Zacatecas... Tuvimos buena suerte porque todavia no llegaban. Nuestra familia se movio a un rancho nombrado Providencia de San Luis, Potosi. El dueno era el Senor Lopez, quien tambien era musico. El tocaba esa panzona que le decian mondolon, y su amigo tocaba el bajo sexto. Una vez, invito a various musicos para un baile en el rancho. Alli conoci a mi marido, Tomas. Despues, regresaba y regresaba, hasta que nos casamos."

(A woman my mother knew asked her to loan me to help her. So, I began working... One or two years later, I went to work for Carmen Perez; then, for Erminda Lopez, Carmen's mother-in-law... I left work there when the Revolution began, and when Pancho Villa's troops were approaching Zacatecas... We had good luck because they had not yet arrived. Our family moved to a rancho called Providencia in San Luis, Potosi. It was owned by Mr. Lopez, who was also a musician... He played that fat instrument they called a mandolin, and his other friend played a twelve-string guitar. ... Once, he invited several musicians for a rancho baile (dance). That's where I met my husband, Tomas. Later, he returned and continued returning, until we got married.)⁶

She continued, "Nos casamos en 1917 allii en un pueblo que se llamaba San Francisco... tenia diez y ocho anos... Ya luego ya despues... nos movimos a otro pueblito que se llamaba Concepcion de Oro...ahi era donde el trabajaba. El trabajara en las minas y pues ahi no habia trabajo. Mi marido hallo trabajo en una mina Iglesia con gerentes Americanos. Llegaba muy cansado. Despues, se hizo un tipo de reportero que daba informacion sobre las minas, y trabajo en officina arriba de ellas. Les pagaban muy poco – ochenta -cinco centavos diario. Una vez, un grupo de ellos entraron a la oficina del gerente y preguntaron por un incremento en el sueldo. Los rechazo, les llamo una bola de tacos, y los amenacio a reducir su pago a cincuenta centavos diarios. Los trabajadores lo asaltaron ay lo mataron. El resultado fue que la compania termino produccion y cerro. Todos perdieron su empleo, incluyendo mi marido. Nos movimos a Monterrey, y mi marido y un cunado caminaron las calles buscando empleo."

(We were married in 1917 in the small town of San Francisco... I was eighteen... We then moved to another small town, Concepcion de Oro... That's where he worked. He worked in the mines and then there was no work there. My husband found work in an English mine with American supervisors. He came home very tired. Later, he became a kind of reporter who issued information about the mines, and he worked in an office above them. They were paid very little - eighty-five cents a day. One time, a group of them {miners}walked into the supervisor's

office and asked for a raise. He rejected their request, called them a ball of tacos, and threatened to reduce their pay to fifty cents a day. The workers assaulted and killed him. As a result, the company stopped production and closed. Everyone lost their jobs, including my husband. We moved to Monterrey, and my husband and a brother-in-law walked the streets, looking for employment.)⁷

Maura recalled what happened after, “De pronto, un contratista Americano llego a Monterrey, buscando trabajadores de granja. Les ofrecio trabajo piscando ejote y otros en Tejas. Entonces, nos fuimos a la frontera. Cruzamos el rio con tres de nuestros ninos cerca de Brownsville, el dia antes de la navidad en 1920. Un hombre nombrado Narciso Partida nos cruzo en una lancha. El rio estaba mas ancho y mas hondo que hoy.” (Soon, an American (labor recruiter) arrived in Monterrey, looking for farm workers. He offered them work picking green beans and other crops in Texas. So, we left for the border. We crossed the river with three of our children near Brownsville, the day before Christmas in 1920. A man named Narciso Partida crossed us in a rowboat. The river was much wider and deeper than today.)⁸ Then, Maura became pensive and remembered her children, “Las muchachas me ayudaban con la familia. Salieron muy buenas tambien, y se casaron. Las tres ya murieron y mi hijo mas grande tambien murio. Todos fueron hijos buenos. Crecieron aqui; se casaron aqui, y murieron aqui; todos.” (My girls helped me with the family. They were all good children. They grew up here; they married here, and they died here; all of them.)⁹

Maura then commented about her life after she arrived in the United States, “Ya que llegamos, trabajamos en el rancho San Rafael y nos quedamos alli hasta 1948. Vivimos en una casita pequena en seguida de mi hermana, que llego aqui primero. Tenia un piso de tierra, paredes de lodo, y sin electricidad (un jacal). Algunas veces, trabaje en las labores con mi familia, piscando algodón, repollo, papas – lo que hubiera. Nos pagaban un dia diario. Casi no tuve escuela formal – no mas aprendi libro uno para ninos. Mi hermana me enseno como escribir letras, y puedo leer and escribir mi nombre. Si necesito escribir algo, si puedo, pero esta feo. Como le dije, no tuve escuela.” (Once here, we worked at Rancho San Rafael and remained here until 1948. We lived in a tiny house next to my sister, who had come first. It had a dirt floor, mud walls, and no electricity (a jacal or thatched-roof hut... Sometimes, I worked in the fields with my family - picking cotton, cabbage, potatoes – whatever there was. We were paid one dollar per day. I had almost no formal schooling – I only learned book one for children. My sister taught me how to write letters, and I can read and write my name. If I need to write something, I can, but it’s ugly. Like I told you, I had no schooling.)¹⁰

Lopez also remembered what her family did for entertainment, “Nuestra familia iba al rio para celebrar el dia de San Juan por guayin. Nos ibamos el dia antes. Tambien fuimos a la playa, y tomo tres horas ir y venir. Habia much arena. Preparamos las comidas sobre una lumbre. Nuestra comida incluyea frijoles, papas, y chorizo. Una vez, nos atascamos en la arena. Lo mas que escarvavamos, lo mas que el guayin se sumia. Tomamos horas para salirnos. El sol estaba ingrato; regrese a mi casa con un dolor de cabeza, que no se iba.”

(Our family went to the river to celebrate el dia de San Juan (St. John’s Day), travelling by wagon. We left the day before.... We also went to the beach, and it took three hours each way. There was so much sand. We prepared our meals over a fire. Our food included beans, potatoes and chorizo (Mexican sausage). Once, we got stuck in the sand. The more we dug, the more the wagon wheel sunk. Tomamos horas para salir. It took us hours to get out. The sun was ungrateful, and I got home with a headache that would not disappear.)¹¹

Maura continued, “Me recuerdo de las Pastorelas Navidenas en el rancho. Hombres construyen el escenario navideno, y aprendieron sus lineas para la obra. Las mujeres y ninas preparaban bunuelos, capitrotada, y tamales para la cena. Para tamales, masa estaba preparada con manteca y embarradas en ojas de elote. El relleno era carne de puerco, cortada en pedazitos especiados con chile de color y otras especias. El tiempo para cocinarlos dependia en el tamaño de la olla y la cantidad de tamales... Cuando mi familia compro un radio, escuchaba a Narciso Martinez (el Huracan del Valle, el Padre de la Musica Conjunto). Nunca lo vi en persona, pero años despues, lo vi en television. Fue muy popular. Todos mis ninos sabian del y iban sus bailes. Fue un buen hombre.”

(I remember the Christmas pastorelas (traditional Mexican folk plays) on the rancho. The men built the

nativity scene and learned their lines for the play. Women and girls prepared bunuelos (fritters), capirotada (bread pudding), and tamales for supper. For the tamales, masa (corn dough) was prepared with lard and spread on corn husks. Filling consisted of pork meat cut into small pieces and spiced with chile de color (red pepper) and other spices. The amount of cooking time depended on the size of the pot and number of tamales. 10 When my family bought a radio, I listened to Narciso Martinez (El Huracan del Valle, the Father of Conjunto Music). I never saw him in person, but years later, I saw him on television. He was very popular. All my children knew about him and attended his dances. He was a good man.)¹²

Dona Maura then spoke about the 1933 Hurricane. “{Lo pasamos} en la calle porque nos fuimos, salimos de la casa...ahi del miedo nos salimos donde hubiera gente. Y nos fuimos, el huracan en su fuerza y salimos con las criaturas en los brazos y nos fuimos a una casa, un tendajo que tenia un amigo de nosotros en San Rafael. Y pues, ahi pasamos el huracan ...Pues el ruido del aire era muy fuerte...Como a las cinco de mañana se paro..Comenzo como hoy a la una de la tarde, y se acabo hasta otro dia a las once del dia...Pues la casa de nosotros la avento, y la dejo en el agua. Todas mis gallinas se murieron y mis marranos – todo...pero que supiera yo de muertos, no.”

(We went through it in the street because we left our home...there, because of our fright we got out to where there were people. And we left, the hurricane in full force and we left with the children in our arms, and we went to a house, a grocery store owned by a friend in San Rafael. And well, we passed the hurricane there... Well, the sound of the wind was very strong... At about five o'clock in the morning, it stopped... It began like today at one in the afternoon and ended the next day at eleven... It tossed our house and left it in the water. All my chickens died and my pigs – everything... but did I know of any deaths, no.)¹³

Her husband, Tomas, died in 1951. Maura spoke about how that changed her life, “El trabajaba en la labor... Despues, trabajo aqui {Brownsville} cuando habia platanos {en el Puerto of Brownsville}...Yo me levantaba muy temprano para despachar mi esposo al trabajo, a las cinco de la mañana... Pero ya despues no le dieron porque senores de 65 anos ya no ocupaban...Que tristeza que ya no trabajaba...Y se volvio a enfermar y murio en '51. Y ya me quede yo sola nada mas con mis dos hijas y Narciso...Y ya entonces empece ya a pedir la pension de mi viejo, de mi esposo. Me daban muy poquito. A veces no completaba. A veces, yo me miraba muy apurada para pagar la renta y los gastos ...Y no, pues gracias a dios.”

(He worked in the field... Later, he worked here (Brownsville) when there were bananas {Port Brownsville}. I woke up very early to send my husband to work at five in the morning...But later, he was not given work because men sixty-five years old, they did not hire...How sad that he no longer worked... Then, he became ill again and died in '51. And then I was left alone with only my two daughters and Narciso {son}... and then, I began to ask for my husband's pension. They gave me very little. At times, I didn't have enough. Sometimes, I had enough. Sometimes, I was very hurried to pay the rent and expenses... And no, but thanks to God...)¹⁴

At sixty-five, Maura began to study for her American citizenship. Proudly, she said, “Me estudie yo sola para hacerme ciudadena con el libro que me dieron... te preguntan de memoria. Te pregunta una palabra y otra y otra... y yo lo aprendi yo sola hasta la aprendi de memoria...El senor me dijo, el que va examinar me, ‘Para que usted quiere el examen?’...En el '72 fue cuando me hize ciudadena...El que nos hablo fue {Judge Reynaldo} Garza. Alla me iban dar el papel de la ciudadenia. Nos cobraron diez dolares. Diez dolares, eso me costo.”

(I studied alone to become a citizen with the book they gave me.... They ask you from memory. They ask one word and another and another...and I learned it by myself until I learned it by memory...The gentleman told me, the one who would test me, ‘Why do you want the exam?... In '72 was when I became a citizen...The one who spoke to us was Garza (Judge Reynaldo Garza). There they would give me my citizenship paper. They charged us ten dollars -ten dollars it cost me!)¹⁵

Our interview continued for another hour. Maura spoke about the 1967 storm, Hurricane Beulah and her recipes for tortillas, menudo, pozole, and picadillo. Then, I asked her how she wanted to be remembered. She answered, “Bueno que piensen de mi como pacifica. Que yo nunca andaba peleando con nadie...Mis hijas se

iban a las escuela. Nunca compraba ropa. Les hacia la ropa a mis hijas Yo nunca pague...Yo me iba a planchar o lavar ropa y todo. Limpiar la casa. Haci cualquier costurita que me caia. Un vestido haci de sencillo...Yo les hacia por cincuenta centavos o una peseta que me dieran, por hacerles un vestido...De los costales de harina hacia una sabana.” She answered, “Well, let them think of me as peaceful, that I was never fighting with anyone...My daughters went to school. I never bought clothes. I made my daughters’ clothes. I never paid... I would iron or wash {for others} and everything. Clean house. Whatever material came my way. A simple dress...I made them for fifty cents or a quarter they gave me to make a dress. From flour sacks, I made a bed sheet. This concluded the interview. She then said, “Quitame esta cosa. Estuvimos aqui bastante rato.” (Take this thing (microphone) off. We were here a long while).¹⁶ I never saw Maura again.

Maura reminded me of my mother, Antonia “Chata” Medrano Garcia Jacome. Chata was born on October 3, 1909, in Gonzalez, Texas. She, like Maura, was born into abject poverty, but not in Mexico, in the United States. Her father, Gabino, was born in San Fernando, Tamaulipas and her mother, Escolastica, was born in Gonzalez, Texas. They and their twelve children made a living there by working in the fields six days a week, picking potatoes, green beans and cotton. Antonia remembered, “Nos pagaban treinta cinco centavos por cien libras de algodón. Comiamos el lonche de papas y huevo bajo de un árbol en las labores de algodón.” (We were paid thirty-five cents for a hundred pounds of cotton. We ate our lunch of papas and huevo (potatoes and egg) under a tree or in the cotton fields.)¹⁶ When Antonia was seven, the family moved to Yoakum, Texas where there was more work, but also more discrimination. Later, when she was in her teens, Antonia was forced to fight some Anglo boys who were beating her younger brother Sabino because he was “Mexican.”¹⁷ In 1920, the Garcia family moved to Rio Hondo. Antonia remembered walking and travelling to the Valley in a wagon.¹⁸ Although less than two hundred and fifty miles, the journey was lengthy and difficult.¹⁹ Antonia recalled, “Nos tomo once dias. Le preguntaba a mi papa si mi perrito podia irse en el guayin, y yo caminaba...Comiamos en el lado del camino.” (It took us eleven days. I asked my father if my little dog could ride in the wagon, and I would walk... We ate on the side of the road.”)²⁰

Her first house in Rio Hondo was like Maura’s first house in Mexico. Chata remembered, “Nos movimos a una casa de adobe con piso de tierra y techo de lona... Un compadre de Gabino le dio acres cerca del Arroyo Colorado, y su granja logro cosechas buenas de repollo zanoria y algodón... Pero en 1923, el Arroyo Colorado rebosio y destruyo su cosecha, forzandonos a mover otra vez. Afortunadamente, Nicolas Garcia, un sobrino de Gabino, nos ayudo.”

(We moved into an adobe house with a dirt floor and a canvas roof...One of Gabino’s compadres gave him acreage near the Arroyo Colorado, and their farm produced positive yields of cabbage, carrots, and cotton. However, in 1923, the arroyo overflowed and destroyed his crops and their home, forcing us to move again. Fortunately, Nicolas Garcia, one of Gabino’s nephews, helped us.²¹

Antonia recuerdo su generosidad, “El manejo a Rio Hondo, nos trajo a todos en su camioneta, y nos presto una casa mueblada – sin renta... Fuimos una familia unida...Nos quedamos alli por un tiempo, y ma papa busco tierra para comprar... Entre a la escuela, y llegue hasta el tercer grado... Nunca fuimos a ningun lugar...Habia catorce de nosotros...Mi papa manejaba el guayin al centro a compar mandado. Nunca nos falto comida, nomas ropa...Mi mama nos hacia ropa de material y bolsas de harina.” (He drove to Rio Hondo, brought all of us back in his pick-up and loaned us a furnished home – rent free...We were a united family.” We stayed there for a time, and my father looked for land to buy... I entered school and got to the third grade. We never went anywhere... There were fourteen of us...My father drove the wagon to town to buy groceries. We never lacked food, just clothing... My mother made our clothes from cloth and flour sacks.)²²

In her late teens, Antonia left fieldwork and began working at El Jardin School, preparing food and washing dishes for some teachers. There, she met a young custodian named Manuel, who was born in Brownsville but was taken as an infant to Matamoros. At fourteen, he returned and worked in the fields until he became janitor

at the school. They met in 1928 and married eleven months later.²³

Antonia also remembered the 1933 Hurricane. Because of the powerful winds, Manuel, Chata, their three children and maternal grandparents rode out the storm in El Jardin School. Their home was less than half a mile from the school and across from the local airport. Chata remembered, “Docenas de personas asustadas estaban en un cuarto grande. Puse a mis tres criaturas debajo de algunas mesas...Por las ventanas, veimos arboles y techos de casas pequenas, ventados el el viento...Habia un hombre a caballo. A los dos los aviento el viento...Jose, el mas chico, era bebuto y lloraba porque tenia hambre. Gabino salio de la escuela en la llovizna y viento en su fuerza, camino al corral, y ordeno una vaca en nuestra lecheria.... Regreso a la escuela con media cubeta de leche. Cuando termino el chubasco, nuestra familia regreso a casa. Estaba intacta aunque el techo estaba danado... Perdimos vacas, puercos y gallinas, pero comparados a otros, tuvimos suerte.”

(Dozens of frightened people were in a large room...I placed my three children under some tables... Through the windows, we saw small trees and roofs of houses being tossed in the air...There was man on a horse. Both were blown away. 26 Joe, her youngest, was an infant and crying because he was hungry. Gabino exited the school in the torrential rain and wind, walked to the corral, and milked a cow in our dairy...He returned to the school with half a pail of fresh milk. When the storm ended, our family returned home. It was still intact, despite some roof damage... We lost some cows, pigs and chickens, but compared to others, we were lucky.)²⁴

For the next forty-five minutes, Antonia continued to talk about her life, her marriage, her children, and Hurricane Beulah. For me, the experience was surreal. I knew her, but I did not know about her. The more I listened, the prouder I was that Chata was my mother and that my most important teachers were my parents.

Everyday people are usually excluded as contributors to the history of the Rio Grande Valley. They did not own railroad companies, but they built railroads and laid down tracks. They did not own large ranches or commercial farms, but they maintained them and picked the crops. They did not own hotels or food processing plants, but they labored in them. The vast majority were Mexican American or Mexican workers, and many were women. Proof of their contributions is usually not in books or journals. It was in the tierra (soil) under their fingernails and the sudor (sweat) on their backs. Some were our abuelitas (grandmothers) and visabuelitas (great grandmothers) born on both sides of the border. Maura Lopez Gonzalez and Antonia Medrano Garcia were two of them. Both came to the Valley for a better life, and both worked in the fields to survive. Both were traditional and resilient; both are worth remembering, and both were Tejanas with untold stories about the Migrant Generation.

Endnotes

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