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CHAPTER 12

Love as Mirror and Pathway

The Undocumented Emotive Configuration of Mexican Immigration

ANA ELIZABETH ROSAS

In April 2012, fifty-two-year-old Virginia Martínez was deported from Los Angeles, California, to Río Tijuana, México, and separated from her ten children. Upon hearing that US authorities had placed five of her children into adoption, she tried to ease her desperation with drugs and quickly became addicted. Her story is not atypical. The tents and shacks of the Río Tijuana encampment, just across the river from San Diego, have provided shelter to countless other deported—and now homeless—Mexican immigrant parents. Feeling angry, abandoned, and hopeless, they, like Martínez, have often succumbed to illicit behaviors as a way of coping. They are victims of inhumane binational policies that have separated them from their spouses and children. Their stories—and their humanity—are all too easy to ignore.

On September 16, 2013, *La Opinión*, the Spanish-language and Los Angeles-based newspaper published a story that examined cases such as Virginia Martínez's, to try to raise awareness about the plight of Mexican immigrant women and men in the drug-ridden Río Tijuana encampment.¹ *La Opinión* told its readers that it was extremely difficult to investigate and write this news story because of the shame that these recently deported women and men felt about their descent into drug addiction, prostitution, and other crimes just to survive. They did not want their families—and anonymous readers—to know the depths of their despair and deprivation. Despite their reticence to share too many details, their love for their children and spouses, left behind in places like South Central Los Angeles, is evident in the newspaper account. Their stories are essential to understanding

the culture of absence born out of the day-to-day emotional lives of Mexican immigrants who have risked—or experienced—separation from their loved ones, either because of restrictive immigration policies that limit family reunification or because of coerced deportation.

This chapter investigates the emotional lives of one group of Mexican immigrants: those who migrated to the United States in the mid-twentieth century (1940–1960), often on temporary labor contracts and without their families, in the hope of improving their financial futures. Some of these immigrants later remained in the United States undocumented, working and sending money to loved ones back home. The chapter also explores the emotional lives of the spouses and children they left behind. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, Mexican women and men of varying legal statuses tried to maintain long-distance romantic and familial relationships across the US-México border. However, records of these interactions are absent from policy reports, newspapers, and the legal and social histories of immigration.² I seek to recover this culture of absence, thereby contributing to a more *humane* history of immigration. Drawing on oral interviews, I try to capture the emotional weight and toll of separation from loved ones as immigrants traveled across the US-México border in search of better economic opportunities.

Interviews offer valuable tools for recapturing lost or erased histories. For this chapter I drew on interviews with twenty elderly Mexican immigrant women and men who gave me a sense of their emotional investments, courage, and resourcefulness over time and across borders. In my interviews over the years, I have learned that discussing films and songs of love with my interviewees allows my subjects to discuss difficult emotional lives marked by absence and love more easily with *desconocidos* (strangers). Films and songs of love become pathways for exploring personal issues that, in some cases, my interviewees had never acknowledged or discussed before. Some of my interviewees were/continue to be undocumented. Their humanity becomes fully evident in their life stories, allowing me (and the reader) to resist calling their experience “living in the shadows,” a familiar but dehumanizing trope common among scholars and journalists who write about immigration.³ Hence, the history of Mexican immigration, and as Virginia Martínez’s absence reveals, is steeped in emotional lives marked by love, longing, and the US-México border.

The Bracero Program and Operation Wetback

Many of my interviewees were separated from their loved ones as a result of the temporary labor programs (Bracero Programs) of 1942–1946 and 1951–1964, and the deportation program called Operation Wetback (1954). During World War II the United States needed workers to plant and harvest the crops that fed its soldiers, wartime allies, and domestic population. The federal government turned to its

southern neighbor, México, for this labor. Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho supported the idea on the grounds that temporary contract labor in the United States rehabilitated rural Mexican men and turned them into modern citizens. Confident that after earning US wages and learning US methods and skills, these men would return adequately prepared to invest and labor in México and move the nation forward on the path toward technological sophistication and modernity, Ávila Camacho overlooked the Bracero Program's toll on braceros (Mexican men participating in this program) and the families they left behind. The Mexican government did not provide these families with information or funds to help them weather the absence of their bracero family relatives. Instead, these men and their families were expected to derive comfort from varying notions of México's close geographic proximity to the United States.⁴

Preventing families from migrating together, the Bracero Program especially strained romantic and family relationships and made it difficult for men and women to express and nurture their love for each other. After their contracts ended, Mexican workers were required to return home. Indeed, part of their wages were withheld by authorities and returned to them only after they arrived in México, to guarantee repatriation. (In many cases, these funds were never returned.)⁵ It was not unusual for braceros to skip out on their contracts, hoping to find better-paying and more humane employment elsewhere. Many remained in the United States undocumented for a time, sending part of their wages back home to support their spouses and children.

In the midst of such emotional turmoil, braceros undertook rigorous and poorly compensated labor in the United States. American growers who were beneficiaries of bracero contracts were required to provide their workers with reliable housing, hearty meals, and healthy working conditions. These growers were also entrusted to transport workers to and from their employment destinations, pay them the prevailing wage for hours worked, and provide them adequate medical services when physically injured or sick. Many growers did not meet these contractual obligations. Living conditions in the agricultural fields were often dire, with poor and unsanitary housing, inferior food, long hours, and dangerous transportation and work conditions. Despite these problems, Americans generally considered the wartime bracero program a success. Another bracero program was established in 1951 and lasted thirteen years until its termination on December 31, 1964. Over its lifetime, the program paved the way for temporary (and permanent) migration of an estimated five million Mexican immigrants (mostly men), which had long-term consequences for their lives and livelihoods, as well as for the lives of their loved ones back home.⁶

During the 1950s the Mexican undocumented population grew. Some of the undocumented were former braceros who continued working in the United States. Others were workers who were enticed by American growers to migrate across

the porous US-México border, often with the full cooperation of the US Border Patrol.⁷ The federal government was forced to crack down, however, in response to a growing concern that Mexican workers were displacing US-born workers. During the summer of 1954 the US government, with Mexican government cooperation, invested in the widely publicized Operation Wetback: the deployment of border enforcement agents operating airplanes, buses, helicopters, and jeeps to detect, interrogate, and deport undocumented Mexican immigrants to the interior of México.⁸ Deportation became a US government priority because of the perceived “invasion” of Mexican undesirable aliens.

Operation Wetback had an unintended consequence, however: it redirected many undocumented Mexican immigrant men away from agriculture and into employment where they would not be easily detected by law enforcement agents and would perhaps even earn higher wages. This, in turn, meant longer periods of separation from their relatives, girlfriends, fiancés, and/or spouses. This continued separation exacerbated all types of fears among those left at home in México: that their loved ones would be ill-treated in the United States; that they would fail to realize their financial goals; that they would begin new lives in the States and forget them.

The families of those who migrated expected their loved ones to remain faithful and in relationship across the distances, even when there was little or no written communication. Such expectations—and the failure to meet them—were a source of untold emotional pain for the women and men caught up in these long-distance romantic relationships. The films and songs of love they consumed offered solace and gave them an acceptable outlet for expressing their anxieties and their concerns about the safety and whereabouts of their loved ones. For young people, in particular, hoping to marry once their loved ones returned home, these films and songs of love offered cautionary tales about what might happen if they did not exercise patience and behave with proper decorum. The absence and emotions born out of Mexican immigration reveals the intense expansiveness of the emotional grip of mid-twentieth-century immigration restrictions on the imaginaries and hearts of Mexican women and men separated across the US-México border.

***Cartas a Eufemia* (Letters to Eufemia)**

The 1952 film *Cartas a Eufemia* (Letters to Eufemia) exemplifies the social and emotional challenges of waiting for the return of one’s boyfriend.⁹ According to several of my interviewees, the film urged Mexican women not to lose hope, to “wait with the utmost patience” for letters from their loved one, and to count on an eventual reunification.¹⁰ Failure to exercise such patience would undermine their reputations and perhaps lead to their public ostracism.

The film's principal characters are Eufemia, a nineteen-year-old Mexican woman, and her boyfriend, Luterio. Because Eufemia's elderly father has been wrongfully accused of arson, Luterio travels to México City to attend her father's court case and to earn money for their future life together. Luterio's departure sends Eufemia into an emotional tailspin. Townspeople begin complaining about her volatility and her many *desencuentros* (failure to live up to expectations). She goes to the post office daily to mail pleading letters to her beloved and pines publicly when she does not receive a response, much to the amusement or disgust of the townspeople. The lack of written communication leaves Eufemia utterly devastated. She eventually gives up on Luterio and begins to spend time with another young man, Ignacio, thus exposing herself to public ridicule and censure. One of the town's patriarchs, a wealthy landowner rejected by Eufemia, commissions a special song to criticize her lack of commitment, which raises suspicions about her virtue and moral character. The song is played by the town band, and sung in mocking tone by the town's women.¹¹

"CARTA A EUFEMIA" (LETTER TO EUFEMIA)

Cuando recibas esta carta sin razón, Eufemia
 Ya sabrás que entre nosotros todo terminó
 When you receive this letter without reason, Eufemia
 You will know that everything between us has ended

Si no la hubieses recibido por traición, Eufemia
 If you did not receive it as an act of betrayal, Eufemia

Te devuelvo tu palabra
 Te la vuelvo sin usarla,
 Y que conste en esta carta que acabamos de un jalón

I return your word
 I return it without using it
 And let it be known in this letter that we are all at once through

No me escribistes
 You did not write me

Y mis cartas anteriores no sé si las recibistes
 And my previous letters I don't know if you received them

Tu me olvidastes
 You forgot me

Y mataron mis amores el silencio que les distes
 And your silence killed my love

A ver sí a esta si le das contestación Eufemia
 Let's see if you actually answer this one, Eufemia

Though shocked and in deep emotional despair over the public attack, Eufemia does not respond to such slandering of her public reputation. In this, she adheres to gendered expectations that women must refrain from publicly confronting men. Nonetheless, Ignacio, out of his love for her, enlists the same band to perform, “Contestación de Eufemia” (Eufemia’s Response), a song which explains her actions, and defends her honor and sexual virtue:¹²

“CONTESTACIÓN DE EUFEMIA” (EUFEMIA’S RESPONSE)

Tengo en mis manos la última carta
que me escribistes
Luterio

I hold in my hands the last letter
You wrote me
Luterio

Y hablando de ella y su contenido
debo expresarte lo que en renglon te digo

And talking about it and its content
I have to express what in each line I tell you

Pides motivo de rompimiento
y del silencio que piensas que te di
debo decirte Luterio de mi vida que de tus anteriores
ninguna recibí

You ask for reasons for our break up
And of the silence you thought that I gave you
I must tell you Luterio of my life that of your previous letters
I did not receive

Mira Luterio
Te acuerdas de aquel Roque con quien tu te emborrachastes
Ahora es cartero
Y dice que me quiere desde que nos presentastes
Ya ves como andan en el correo
Mejor tus cartas debia certificar

Look Luterio
You remember that Roque that you got drunk with
Now he is a mail carrier
And he says he loves me since you introduced us
You know how they are at the post office
It would have been better if you had certified your letters

Y aquí termino
 Devuelveme mis cosas
 Perdoname la letra y el papel
 Eufemia

And here is where I end
 Return my things
 Forgive my handwriting and paper
 Eufemia

At the conclusion of *Letters to Eufemia*, Luterio eventually returns to formally end his courtship with Eufemia, her father is released from jail, and Ignacio and Eufemia profess their eternal love. But despite the apparent happy ending, Mexican viewers were offered one final public humiliation. The local priest, the town's moral authority, also publicly humiliates Eufemia, calling her "the town's laughingstock [and] reason for scandal."¹³ Although Eufemia insists that she "has not done anything to anyone," the town's priest has the last word.¹⁴ Having found true love in Ignacio may make for a satisfactory ending, but it does not overshadow this film's emphasis on the dangers of impatience, faithlessness, and lack of decorum. Such emphasis resonated with Mexican audiences, as it welcomed a film that discouraged young Mexican women from expressing their feelings of love and longing for their absent Mexican immigrant boyfriends when in the company of extended family relatives, neighbors, and friends.

For Mexican film audiences, the message came loud and clear: women must remain constant in their affections to their absent immigrant boyfriends and husbands, no matter what the circumstances, or risk public humiliation and perhaps social ostracism. As I learned from the oral interviews, the women who saw *Cartas a Eufemia* found the film deeply meaningful. It helped them process their feelings of love for their absent boyfriends and husbands—as well as acknowledge their fears of abandonment—and offered them a cautionary tale of what might happen if their virtue and moral character were called into question. Catalina Ruiz remembers viewing the film with her friends in her rural hometown of San Martín de Hidalgo, Jalisco. She remarked that she and her friends all "feared the humiliation showcased in this film" and "did not dare express" their "anxiety and concern when not hearing from their boyfriends in the United States for months."¹⁵ This film made the "dangers to their public reputation" "all too real for them to ignore the film."¹⁶

As I collected oral life histories with women raised to consider the importance of this film's message, and who navigated long-distance romantic relationships with Mexican immigrant men in adulthood, I came to appreciate the difficulties of waiting patiently for a loved one to return. *Cartas a Eufemia* discouraged them from

questioning the irregularity of written communication with their absent boyfriends or husbands. If they feared being forgotten, or their love unrequited, they were warned to keep those fears to themselves. María Elena Medina, one of my interviewees, revealed that, like Eufemia, she “was not encouraged to ask questions” or to feel entitled to “receive a letter that detailed her boyfriend’s plans for return.”¹⁷ Her parents “insisted” that it was in her best interest to wait until “her boyfriend [could account for] his actions upon his return.”¹⁸ *Letters to Eufemia* illuminated for Mexican women the consequences of making too many demands and having too many expectations.

Beginning in 1952 and until 1980, *Letters to Eufemia* was screened in local movie theaters and regularly aired on television channels throughout the Mexican countryside. The majority of the women and men who have been formative to my investigation of the emotional lives of mid-twentieth-century undocumented Mexican immigration in México and the United States singled out the power of this film to me. They consistently identified this film as “the film” that instilled a deep-seated fear of making too many demands of their boyfriends or husbands working in the United States. María Teresa Garza remembered that “the film inspired us to fear the distance, the border, the expectations that divided us from our boyfriends.”¹⁹ It made clear “that not keeping our love, our relationships to ourselves would make an already painful reality worse.”²⁰ The public humiliation Eufemia endured was all too real for them to discount as just a fictional plotline. They, too, experienced the longing, sadness, and worry that had driven Eufemia to need—and expect—continual correspondence with Luterio. Almost all of these women explained that the film taught them to be extremely patient, and as discreet as possible when in public. Carmen explained, “We were Eufemia, waiting was hard work in private and public.”²¹ The danger of their being publicly chastised as Eufemia had been was very real for these women. Mexican women’s recollections of *Letters to Eufemia* magnifies the emotional incentives for these women to wait patiently for the return of their absent Mexican immigrant boyfriends.

I must admit that I first learned of *Letters to Eufemia* in 1987, at age nine, while living in South Central Los Angeles. Throughout my upbringing, my mother, Dolores Graciela Rosas Medina, had entrusted María Teresa with picking me up from school and caring for me until the end of my mother’s workday. This allowed me to enjoy countless afternoons with María Teresa listening to her impressive musical record collection, which included Pedro Infante’s musical performance of “Letter to Eufemia” and “Eufemia’s Response” (1952).²² María Teresa loved Pedro Infante. In her estimation, he was the most talented Mexican musical artist to ever sing or record a song, so despite my visceral aversion to the mocking language in these songs, she insisted that I endure our listening to these songs together. Without fail or my paying close attention to the lyrics of this song, I would automatically cringe

whenever these songs were a part of our musical rotation. The mean-spiritedness of these lyrics was very palpable and too severe for me to enjoy.

Eventually, María Teresa would use our listening to “Letters to Eufemia” and “Eufemia’s Response” to caution me against publicly asserting my affection, most especially in writing, toward any boyfriend. She shared with me in the strictest of confidence that in 1961 she had been in a long-distance romantic relationship with a young man who was working undocumented in the United States, and that her mother had used these songs and the film *Letters to Eufemia* to scare her. She was urged to be discreet when corresponding with this boyfriend or else risk public ridicule. Although María Teresa did not have a copy of the film to share with me, she insisted that *Letters to Eufemia* and these songs were to be taken seriously, as they illustrated the range of feelings that made corresponding with one’s boyfriend, and expressing love for him in public, a dangerous proposition for women navigating mid-twentieth-century expectations. The lessons of this film outlived the Bracero Program and Operation Wetback and marked what these women and men remembered most intimately about their coming of age.

The binational policies that prevented women and men from enjoying their romantic relationships and family lives forced alternative pathways for nurturing their long-distance romantic relationships, as well as for shouldering their heartache when these relationships did not survive. They had to reconceptualize how to remain emotionally connected to each other across the US-México border and be hardworking despite the weight of a broken heart in the face of governmental obstruction of their personal and even written communication and restrictive gender expectations. Moreover, laboring as undocumented Mexican immigrant workers for indefinite periods, separated from each other, and under the constant fear of deportation and public humiliation inspired women and men in these long-distance romantic relationships to be most resourceful as they strived to remain emotionally connected to each other. Catalina explained, “Keeping silent required us to listen to songs of love with all of our heart, our imagination.”²³

Listening to Love

Mid-twentieth-century films and songs of love allowed elderly Mexican immigrant women and men to acknowledge the emotional toll that long-distance romantic relationships exerted on their lives. They also made mourning the absence or loss of romantic relationships that did not survive the emotional strain of separation viable for them. Lorenzo Macías and Pablo Martínez were among the Mexican immigrant men I interviewed who listened to and reflected on the lyrics of songs, especially more recent musical recordings such as Banda la Costeña’s “Una Aventura” (“An Adventure,” 1995) and Vicente Fernández’s “Aca Entre Nos” (“Between

Us," 1998), which they feel perfectly articulate their experiences so many decades ago. These songs of love, all performed and recorded by highly celebrated Mexican musical artists, have inspired them to recognize without fear or shame the emotional heartache they suffered when they were betrayed or rejected by the women they loved. Ironically, it was their love for these women that had led them to migrate to the United States in the first place, hoping to earn enough money to one day offer them financial security. More than seventy years later, the men continue to grieve the loss of these relationships, and the music and lyrics offer them a safe and acceptable outlet for expressing their emotions.

Having lost the love of women who "had either been their first love or the love of their lives" was "emotionally devastating" for Mexican immigrant men coming of age as *braceros* and undocumented Mexican immigrant men, said Pablo Martínez.²⁴ Men were expected to recover easily from such emotional pain, but it was difficult to do so working long hours and living among strangers. Asked to reflect on their experience many decades later, they finally acknowledged the "emotional wounds that had been too shameful to recognize at the time of their occurrence."²⁵

During my interview with Lorenzo Macías, we listened to Banda la Costeña's "An Adventure," and Macías was drawn immediately to the storyline in the ballad: a story of love and betrayal.²⁶ Macías wept as he heard the lyrics, reminded of the first woman he truly loved, Judith Méndez, who rejected him in 1955 after a year's separation. Judith's betrayal had not been easy for Lorenzo to overcome when laboring in Los Angeles as an undocumented Mexican immigrant. His blind confidence in Judith's love for him had rendered him vulnerable. He had ignored the unevenness in their expressed feelings and their correspondence. "Separated from each other, from the woman you loved across borders made being in love that much more challenging," he said. "You fell in love harder and pined for this woman wholeheartedly."²⁷ He had spent three years of savings to finance his undocumented entry into the United States, with the hopes of returning a year later with enough money to purchase an apartment, and to marry and raise a family. Instead, he learned that days after his departure, Judith began dating, and eventually married, one of his closest friends. The double betrayal was a powerful blow to his heart. It took two-and-a-half years for him to overcome his broken heart and commit to another romantic relationship.

Now, many decades later, he was an elderly married man with adult children of his own, but it wasn't until the telling his life history that he finally acknowledged and mourned his suppressed heartache. Listening to "An Adventure" as part of his oral life history interview allowed Macías to revisit his failed romantic relationship and to recognize it as formative to his gender identity. It afforded him the emotional courage to mourn his first love, to admit that such loss had made it harder to return to his family and hometown, and to eventually fall in love with someone else.

"UNA AVENTURA" (AN ADVENTURE)

Que te quise mucho no podrás negarlo
Y que mi cariño no supiste amar
Que te di mi vida sin pedirte nada
Solo me engañabas me hiciste llorar
Solo sufrimiento diste a mi vida
Este cruel despecho no lo he de borrar
Aun después de todo yo te sigo amando
Y quien sabe cuando te podré olvidar

That I loved you very much, you cannot deny
And that my love you did not know how to cherish
That I gave you my life without asking you for anything
Only suffering you brought to my life
This cruel heartbreak I cannot erase
Despite everything I continue loving you
And who knows when I will be able to forget you

Muy ilusionado estaba yo contigo
Como fui tan ciego para no entender
Que era una aventura lo que tu buscabas

Very illusioned I was with you
How was I so blind to not understand
That it was an adventure that you were looking for

Y yo por confiado donde fui a caer
Solo sufrimiento diste a mi vida
Este cruel despecho no lo he de borrar

And because I trusted you I ended very badly
Only suffering you brought to my life
This cruel heartbreak I cannot erase

Heartbreak was very difficult for the former braceros and the undocumented Mexican immigrant men to admit and discuss. In 1953 Pablo Martínez learned that his girlfriend of one-and-a-half years, María de la Cruz Álvarez, had broken her promise to wait for him during his sojourn in the United States.²⁸ After tirelessly picking cotton for a year in La Mesa, Texas, he returned to find María de la Cruz engaged to a family friend, and he felt spurned and humiliated. He believed so much in her love that he had endured labor exploitation for the sake of a more financially secure future with her. Days and even years after María de la Cruz's rejection, Pablo refused to discuss or mourn his loss.

In my 2007 interview with Pablo Martínez, he discussed the first time he heard the lyrics of “Between Us,” in the company of fellow sojourners from México. The lyrics, he said, helped him realize that he had suffered in silence for years. “This song made it easier to recognize [my] love for her, the pain of being separated, in love, and without hope of a future together.”²⁹ Listening and reflecting on this song’s lyrics in the company of immigrant men who had also had their hearts broken made it possible to mourn her loss. Despite his fears of being publicly perceived as an emotionally broken and desperate man, the song’s lyrics gave him the “nerve to recognize and mourn how truly heartbroken [he] had been for years.”³⁰ He was finally able to admit that María de la Cruz’s rejection had informed his 1956 decision to delay his return to his hometown of Ameca, Jalisco, until 1962 simply because he could not fathom running into her as a happily married woman. The song became an essential part of his immigration story:

“ACA ENTRE NOS” (BETWEEN US)

Por presumir, a mis amigos les conte
Que en el amor ninguna pena me aniquila
Que pa’ probarles
de tus besos me olvide
Y me bastaron unos tragos de tequila

To brag, to my friends I told them
That in love there was no pain that had gotten the best me
That to prove I had forgotten your kisses
Some shots of tequila had been enough

Les platiqué que me encontré con otro amor
Y que en sus brazos fui dejando de quererte
Que te aborrezco desde el día de tu traición
Y que hay momentos que he deseado hasta tu muerte

I told them that I found another love
And that in her arms I stopped loving you
That I hate you since the day of your betrayal
And there are moments that I had wished even your death

Aca entre Nos
Quiero que sepas la verdad
No te he dejado de adorar
Alla en mi triste soledad
Me han dado ganas de gritar
Salir corriendo
Y preguntar que es lo que ha sido de tu vida

Between us
 I want you to know the truth
 I have not stopped adoring you
 There in my sad loneliness
 I've wanted to scream
 Go out running
 And ask what has become of your life

Aca entre nos
 Siempre te voy a recordar
 Y hoy que a mi lado ya no estás
 No queda mas confesar
 Que ya no puedo soportar
 Que estoy odiando sin odiar
 Porque respiro por la herida

Between us
 I will always remember you
 And today that you are not by my side
 There is nothing left but to confess
 That I cannot endure
 That I am hating without hating
 Because I breathe through the wound

Listening to songs of love also became an important outlet for Mexican women when separated from their Mexican immigrant boyfriends by the US-México border. Eighty-four-year-old Carmen Quezada is among the women who finds solace in “Ya lo Sé” (“I Already Know”), the famous *ranchera* popularized by Mexican artists such as Vicente Fernández, Juan Gabriel, and the late Mexican American singer Jenni Rivera. This song reminds her of a period of her youth when she longed for her absent Mexican-immigrant boyfriend, Ricardo, as he labored in the United States.³¹ She recollects that when listening to this song, she did not resent her absent boyfriend or his decision to labor in the United States. Instead, this song emboldened her to acknowledge and feel “the heartache and loneliness of his absence and waiting for him” in the privacy of her parents’ household as integral to his being able to labor in the United States.³² Carmen understood his laboring in the United States to earn funds for them to marry and begin their life together, but she found it emotionally painful to accept that his immigration and labor required his absence and their separation across the US-México border. Songs of love render the emotional underpinnings of Mexican women’s responses to mid-twentieth-century Mexican immigration and US employment conditions, as well as their impact on their emotional welfare.

Carmen listened to songs of love when alone, and like many women in long-distance romantic relationships, she wore a white shawl over her head and shoulders when out in public to signal to others that she was in a committed relationship and did not want to answer any sensitive questions about the state of this long-distance romantic relationship. Wearing the white shawl came at a high price, however. It required women like Carmen to be discreet: to remain silent about their fears of abandonment, unrequited love, and infidelity. My interviewees explained that shouldering such “emotional anxiety honorably, in silence, earning and keeping the right to wear the white shawl” made for “many a sleepless night, tears shed alone,” and made it difficult to derive much joy from day-to-day social interactions in Mexican society.³³

Beginning in 1950, when she first entered into her relationship, until 1955, Carmen pretended that she was not in emotional pain in order to prove herself worthy of the white shawl, but the performance of fidelity meant hardly ever talking, losing a considerable amount of weight, and crying herself to sleep for weeks at a time as she listened to songs of love. Her boyfriend, Ricardo, failed to return quickly, as he had promised, and this led her to question the seriousness of his emotional commitment to their love and to their future marriage.

Carmen was exhausted from keeping her fears and doubts to herself. She found it easier to spend her time cleaning the family home, because it shielded her from conversation with anyone beyond her family relatives. Carmen feared breaking into tears in public, which would call into question her fidelity, and thus her right to wear the white shawl. Revealing the intensity of her emotional anxiety in public would have cast indelible doubt on her moral character, honor, and confidence, as well as her emotional commitment, jeopardizing her (and her family's) public reputation as well as her prospects of marrying Ricardo or any other suitor. With so much at stake, Carmen suffered alone and in silence throughout the years of separation. Songs of love like “Ya lo sé” (I Already Know) offered a safe and acceptable outlet for expressing the feelings she kept bottled up inside.

In 2009, decades after wearing the white shawl, and after fifty years of marriage to the man she waited for in an arduous silence, Carmen rediscovered “Ya lo sé” and noted that she still found comfort and healing in the song. Although now an elderly woman with children and grandchildren of her own, Carmen listens and often sings along to “Ya lo sé” in the comforts of her family home in Los Angeles. She reflects on the song's qualities that made it possible for her to express her feelings in a socially acceptable way. “Being in love, in a romantic relationship with a Mexican immigrant man was very difficult,” said Carmen. “It was a complicated and difficult emotional world.”³⁴

Carmen confided that it would have been impossible for “her heart to let [Ricardo] go.” The lyrics of “Ya lo sé” captured the depths of her love for him and her fears of losing him—feelings that convention prohibited her from expressing:

“YA LO SÉ” (I ALREADY KNOW)

Vuelveme a decir que no me quieres
para que me quede bien clarito
para ver si en todas las paredes
dejo de escribir te necesito

Tell me again that you don’t love me
So that it is very clear to me
To see if on all the walls
I stop writing that I need you

Ya lo sé
Que aunque llore y te pida
Y te implore
No vas a volver
Ya lo se pero
A mi corazon como diablos se lo hago entender

I already know
That even if I cry and ask you
And implore you
You will not return
I already know
How in hell do I make my heart understand

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Draconian immigration policies and rigid gender expectations imposed untold restrictions on the lives and relationships of Mexican women and men in the mid-twentieth century. These stories are largely untold. Recapturing the emotional lives of immigrants and the loved ones they left behind provides an important lens for understanding the immigrant experience.

Now well into their eighties, the women and men I interviewed can more willingly reflect on the long-distance relationships that defined much of their lives. The inability to maintain regular communication with their loved ones, sometimes for months at a time, was agonizing. Films and songs of love were often the only acceptable outlets for expressing anxiety, fears, and other emotions when facing the absence of their Mexican immigrant loved ones. These films and songs of love, together with oral histories, now allow us to appreciate and understand the

emotional lives of immigrants: stories that have been largely ignored in the historical narratives on immigration.

As the case of Virginia Martínez and her co-nationals in the Río Tijuana encampment demonstrates, recovering the life stories of immigrants is not easy, but it is a task worth undertaking. Silence and ignorance leads to erasure. To understand the full impact of immigration policies on workers and their families, the stories of ordinary women and men must be told. Only then can historians claim to have written a humane history of immigration.

Notes

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